

Dina Rončević Grannies

by Kathy Rae Huffman

“Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.” Nora Ephron (1941–2012)

Dina Rončević posted this quotation on her Facebook page, July 30, 2012. It stands as a beacon for her lifestyle, belief, and artistic practice. Living and working today, in a time that offers opportunities to explore and design real and virtual innovative artistic positions, Rončević is a young multimedia artist concerned with ideas that surround the construction of gender. She aspires to create new models of cultural significance using many non-artistic processes. For example, she challenged the institutions of her artistic development by training as an auto mechanic, learning about engines as a ‘medium’ alongside her studies at the Fine Art Academy. Born and educated in Croatia, formerly part of Yugoslavia, she grew up in a culture where tradition is essential, with many strong artists who are also female role models in the art world.

Fifty years of feminist activism, archived and recorded in artistic works, has resulted in the fact that many artists today do not feel the need to proclaim ‘feminism’ as their artistic approach. The practice of Dina Rončević is no exception. However, it is clear to this writer that she is heavily inspired by feminists. These women (and men) have provided a basis for a critically evolved social consciousness that encourages the next steps: the future, and for Rončević, a time for individual dynamics. Born an early ‘Millennial’ (1980–2000) to post-war ‘baby-boomer’ parents, this generation (also called Generation Y, simply because they come after Gen X) have grown up with access to seemingly unlimited information: Internet and social media are a natural part of their surroundings.

Suck Squeeze Bang Blow (2007–2010), a work in seven parts, included Rončević’s mechanic’s training: a blog; a calendar (very different from most auto shops which exhibited calendars, with photos of nude women); a series of ‘textile collages’ in which she embroidered various mechanical processes; and a book with documents, texts, and her dissertation for the School of Electronics and the Centre of Female Studies, Zagreb (prescribed by these courses). *Mom, I Love You* (2010) was a subsequent embroidery work, but rather than using traditional flowers and patterns passed down through female generations, she embroidered images of three phase current flow. Continuing with the non-traditional use of female crafts, *Four Stroke* (2011) is masterfully produced, her embroidery illustrates the four stroke engine. These earlier works prepared Rončević to propose *Grannies*, her current work that questions knowledge, gender and tradition, and uses not only her sewing skills, but also her experience as a stop frame animator.

Gen Y also grew up nurtured by Children’s TV. Programs like *The Raggy Dolls* (1986–1994), a British cartoon series about discarded dolls who come alive in a factory trash

bin; *Telebugs* (1986–1987) a cartoon about three robots who have televisions for heads; and of course the much earlier, longer running *The Muppets*, who were part of the national broadcaster RTL Televizija, Croatia. These programs were moral tales, very popular and influential, with dubbed versions and spin-offs shown around the world. For example, in 1972, Croatia hosted Animafest Zagreb (an international festival of animated film), where Jim Henson (creator of *The Muppets*) won for best animated film, for one of his *Sesame Street* Programs. Through the dominant discourse of television, fantasy merchandise for children, like Care Bears (developed into a franchise for Nintendo Entertainment), and the individually characterized Cabbage Patch Dolls, the longest running doll franchise in the USA, originally created by an artist (some were even issued with a birth certificate) became treasured possessions. The variety of created characters from the 1980s underpins the zeitgeist of the era, informing many of the fantasies, narratives and characters created by young artists, today.

Grannies, Rončević's work for EMARE MEX, is firstly a stop-motion video using puppet figures she has sewn from cotton wool and created as characters who 'reside' in two apartments. Miniature sets were built from materials found in San Luis Potosí. Video is a medium that facilitates the combination of multiple disciplines. In this case, Rončević's sets will inform the narrative. Her first directorial effort, Rončević explores the characterization of three '60-something' females, taking a look at the generation which parented her parents. Each of the characters is individual, with unique motivation and style. From a fairly traditional perspective, Miss Hablek is unmarried and bourgeois, with TV soaps as her main activity. She rents out rooms to two, equally senior women, Dea and Agatha, who are 'alternative' characters with non-traditional opinions and lifestyles. The three grannies are connected by their proximity, and develop intrigue and drama when they compete over a dowry trunk which contains the heritage and traditions of the past, replete with implications.

The motivations and challenges faced by earlier generations of women, is central to the work of many artists today, as well as artists who form the history of modern and contemporary art. California-based artists Suzanne Lacy and Jeanne Finley, as well as New York-based artists Martha Wilson and Cindy Sherman, have used the aging of women as a topic of their work. Likewise, the craft of puppet making has deep tradition, beginning with folkloric, ethnic examples. Contemporary artists who have worked with puppets include Louise Bourgeois, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Bruce Nauman, Laurie Simmons, Kiki Smith, Kara Walker, Dennis Oppenheim and William Kentridge (for starters). Theatre sets for video and the manipulation of light and sound to emphasize puppet activity is also well represented. For example, Tony Oursler's *EVOL* (1984), produced the same year Dina Rončević was born, features fantasy, the construction of gender and sexual misconduct. Eleanor Antin's *The Nurse and the Hijackers* (1977), an even earlier narrative video, takes place in a passenger airline set, is enacted by cut-out paper dolls. On a larger scale, Joan Jonas has created gallery sized sets like *Lines in the Sand* (2002), that use disparate elements to connect metaphor and female mythology using performance, video, cut-outs, dioramas, and objects.

The set-up for the narrative, in this case the construction and the characterization of each granny, the design of two distinct miniature sets (complete with lighting), and the

dramatic connection between them, is the starting point of *Grannies*. The narrative is also a story of three older women, who would be role models (each in their own way, for better or worse), who reveal their own stories. The resulting video for exhibition will be a short 'pilot', a prelude for a longer work to come. The narrative mode – how Rončević chooses to relate the story – will reveal her methodology. Her youth is not an issue, after all, *When I'm 64* was written by Paul McCartney in 1967, when he was 16 years old. Becoming sixty, for that generation now in their late 60s, was almost beyond comprehension. There is no apprehension about becoming old in Dina Rončević's work. She creates her own 'life script'; she dreams big and has a vision of a future where art has the power to change traditional, limiting beliefs. By deconstructing the categories of identity and questioning gender roles, her characters become heroines who are given permission to be who they truly desire to be, no matter what their age might be.

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