

ART PAPERS

L'âme voyageuse: AGATHE SNOW

Interview: Caia Hagel

Born to Jewish Tunisian parents newly arrived in Corsica, Agathe Snow was about 11 when she arrived undocumented and status-less in New York City. That's where she came of age among the group of young artists that *New York* magazine dubbed "Warhol's Children" in the early/mid-2000s, alongside artists Ryan McGinley, Dan Colen, and her late husband, Dash Snow (née Apparu) shares both a geographical trajectory and a spiritual DNA with the people who form, and have historically formed, the cultural backbone of America—one still, even increasingly, marginalized, be it to dehumanized political rhetoric or simply to the suburbs. Three New York shows in 2015—*Stamina* at the Guggenheim Museum, *Coyote Ugly* at Albert Benda, and *Continuum* at the Journal Gallery—marked her return from a five-year hiatus from the art world (after the birth of her son, Cyrus), and provided three perspectives of the itinerant encounter. *Stamina* premiered a 24-hour-long film documentation of a 24-hour dance party/performance that took place 10 years ago, near Ground Zero; the work is, ostensibly, a celebration of the joy of the communal type of family that joins in dance, rather than in traditional structures. *Continuum* celebrated the universal human spirit in sculptural form, with assemblages of brightly colored objects (toys, hula hoops) and primitivist papier mâché. *Coyote Ugly*, a live installation staged over two weeks in late September, dealt head-on with the lived immigrant experience. Snow spoke to me on the heels of all this about the ideas behind her recent work, the gulf between the promise and the reality of the American dream, and why she cares so much about the outsider.

Caia Hagel: Your interest in migration comes from personal experience—how did you get here?

Agathe Snow: Before I was born, my mom came from Tunisia to Corsica and was separated from her parents, who went to Paris. My grandfather had come from nowhere, got an education, became a doctor, and created a great life for himself as a self-made man. When he was forced to leave Tunisia—my family couldn't stay anymore, because they're Jewish—he had to start all over again. He wasn't accepted in France either, at first, when they fled. My mom struggled in Corsica, too. She never found a place where she felt she was okay. We were always running. We changed apartments every six months—she was constantly trying to find "home" after living in paradise, but never found anything nearly as good. It created constant angst. I never felt in Corsica or in Paris that I could have a voice, really—you don't have a voice as a girl in Europe. I found that voice here, in New York City.

***Coyote Ugly's* title refers to the [people] called "coyotes," who take cash to move people across borders illegally. How does this connect to your story, or connect your story to the unchoreographed experiences of so many of the city's immigrants?**

Coyote Ugly began with the idea of what it means to be a refugee. We built a wall around a stage in the gallery, where I sat interviewing immigrants. The audience stood on the outside of the wall and watched through the holes we'd drilled into it. Having visitors watch our discussions like this really created a feeling of otherness.

I had so many people come to talk: there were chefs, journalists, lawyers, activists, doctors, poets, performers, artists, a fashion designer, dishwashers, people who had been in jail for minor things, high school students—beautiful people originating from South America, Europe, Russia, Iran, Iceland, Lebanon, Cambodia, China, Thailand, and Canada, surviving and building new

lives. I spoke to an Iranian journalist who works for the United Nations, who said she didn't want to be an "immigrant." She didn't want to turn her back on Iran when it was in trouble, but now that she's here, she can't leave. The promise in coming here is so big, and the reality is so complicated.

Slava Mogutin, an artist and gay rights activist from Russia who read his poems at *Coyote Ugly*, got his papers because his life was being threatened. Peuo Tuy, also a poet who read at the gallery, got her papers because she was running from the Khmer Rouge. But everyone comes for serious reasons. I had a guy from Costa Rica tell me his story: he was physically abused by his parents as a boy; he escaped to be with his older siblings who had made it out before him, and went to high school in New Jersey, where they have an amazing program for immigrants. He learned English, graduated at the top of his class, and wants to be a doctor—but he can't go to school without papers. So he's been volunteering for 10 years in the ambulance service, doing first aid, and has won awards for saving American people's lives, but he can't fulfill his dream. He can be an organ donor but he can't get an organ. Still, this guy will never stop dreaming. The optimism he brought into the room was incredible.

You put your finger on the pulse of the American Dream in this show in a visceral way that's not normally felt—were you responding to an urgency to tell the personal sides of these stories, say, as sort of an antidote to anonymous images of crisis in newsfeeds, or the fear mongering of the elections?

Yes, and that's exactly what happened: what started as an open discussion about what it means to be here as someone from somewhere else—someone who has pride in their own culture and also pride in American culture—ended up asking, what is the solution to this big, painful problem? Can these incredible people be seen as refugees instead of migrants, and as people instead of refugees?

OPPOSITE: Agathe Snow, *Coyote Ugly*, September 16, 2015 [photo: Joe Nanashe; courtesy of Albert Benda and the artist]



Slava Mogutin
NOT LEFT FOR MUCH

I live in a foreign house
 I sleep in a foreign bed
 Strange how they don't chase me
 Strange how they don't trace me

Strange that they feed me
 Strange that they pay me
 Strange how often and hard
 at night they stuff me

Strange how they tolerate me
 Strange how they venerate me
 Strange how they rotate me
 on this foreign bed

I sleep in such a strange house
 I live on such a strange bed
 I am often in pain
 There isn't much more of me left

I mean to say that
 I'M NOT LEFT FOR MUCH

New York City, 1996

Slava Mogutin, "NOT LEFT FOR MUCH,"
Food Chain, 2014
 [courtesy of ITNA Press, Brooklyn]

Peuo Tuy
The American-Only-Girl

I was that little dark asian girl who
No one could pronounce her name

"How do you say your name?

Pow

Poe

Pew

Pooh?

And your last name?

Toy

Tie

Too?"

I was that little brown asian girl who
bought Now & Later candies for the white kids
just so she could fit in

I was that little dirty-colored asian girl who
whined to her mother about not buying brand name clothing like
Gap

Aeropostale

Nike

Reebok

"Mom! You can't buy me these jeans, or these shoes, or this
jacket!

This is not pretty enough, not cool enough,
and definitely not expensive enough!"

I was that chinky-eyed asian girl who
got straight A's
the model minority

I was that ridiculed Cambodian girl who
made noodles and fried rice for bake sale day
all the kids made fun of her

I was that don't-wanna-be-khmer-girl
always felt out-casted
Her parents never came to any
PTA meetings
soccer games
track meets
open houses

I was the afraid-to-be-asian-girl
I wanted to be the American-Only-Girl
because the other kids' parents would always ask,
"What do your parents do for a living?"
"Oh, uh, my parents retired."
"My dad was, uh, a technician."
"My mom, uh..."
I would never finish this sentence

The truth was I lied
I felt I was not good enough
I was disgusted of my parents

I was the poor, the low class asian girl whose
family lived in the ghetto
was on welfare
worked multiple jobs

I was the ashamed, the embarrassed asian girl
whose father and mother
picked cans every day for a living in the hot, cold, rain, snow

I was the asian girl who hated herself
for being un-American
who resented her parents
for not living the American Dream.

Peuo Tuy, "The American-Only-Girl," *Khmer Girl*, 2014 [courtesy of the author]

Coyote Ugly was also a way of getting people to think about the significance of that trip, of what it means to even make the journey in the first place. If people were okay at home, they wouldn't flee. No matter where you're coming from, at every level of the journey, you're being played; you're in the hands of monsters. Coyotes are part of a whole market created to take advantage of desperate people. So, I would say that immigrants in particular have heart and beauty and hope and courage *because* it's taken everything for them to make it here. America has promised for 400 years to allow people to come here and start again, when they have no other place to go. The reality is that now, when immigrants do make some headway, get some education, it's like, "I can't go back, but they don't want me here, either." You're in limbo.

Can you say more about this historical context? Was it referenced in order to distance the current vocabularies and imagery from the human realities of migration, too?

I wanted to show how we are all implicated in this very old story. On the first day of the show, I decided to go over it with Americans who have been here for generations—Irish, Italian, Jewish—to hear about what it meant to have so many years of influx of people. And of course, the difficulties happen over and over.

The show ran during the initial hype of the Syrian refugee crisis. America said it would let, say, 5,000 of these refugees in, which was ridiculous. Why couldn't we take more? These people are dying, and we are accusing them of being terrorists? So, again, these stories were sort of about how everyone who's here has a reason to be here, whatever the political, ecological, social, or [emotional] circumstances that led to that. This country is supposed to be that place; the American Dream is a dead concept unless we actually apply it. What else is there besides this that's really glorious in America? If we kill it, we kill the soul of the country.

How are you living as an example of someone whose life is enriched by your multicultural day-to-day experience?

I am an immigrant. I work with immigrants. I hang out with immigrants; they're my friends. People like Veronica, who has two small kids and came with her parents as a child from Mexico—but her parents were deported back. She's from the most dangerous city in the world; it would be suicide to go back there.

When I first moved out to Long Island, I had the worst first meeting with our neighbors. They're white, they're Republican, and we should have absolutely nothing in common, but we talked it out and now we love each other. I mean, tears come into my eyes when I think of my neighbor. Meeting people who are completely different from you, no matter how safe and secure you think you are in your life and views, gives you something new to love and to live for, new discussions—whether it's new types of music, or food, or bigger ideas. Yet we're more and more segregated, even in New York; our thoughts and beliefs are becoming echo chambers, and that's reflected in the neighborhoods we move into. If you don't ever hear another point of view, you create gangs of likeness.

Speaking of "likeness," do you think even youth culture is losing its "edge" via the globalization of a narrow and fixed sense of cool, which is policed relentlessly with "likes"?

There were five kids who are still in high school in *Coyote Ugly*. They came alone across the Mexican border. It's so scary to do that. The courage these kids have is incredible, and so is how fast they get on with things. They all want to be lawyers and police officers. Imagine a country, or a world, populated with people who have this much desire to do good, and so many skills. But they're stuck.

Today's white privileged youth love to take on causes, but they don't live with immigrants, they gentrify. Everyone looks the same, like it's symbolic of some kind of mutual understanding. But there's no opportunity for individuality in that world of totalitarian tastemakers. It's breeding a superconfidence in kids who have never heard "no." This takes people to a place of no resilience and no elasticity—which makes them not only potentially dangerous to others, but also means you have no spirit in life. I want the possibility that I had 10, 15 years ago to be available to these young people again. Artists and activists and kids should all be out on Prince Street, being loud.

How has New York City changed since the post-9/11 youth culture heyday that you were a part of?

New York City is killing itself. It's nothing without its immigrants, and it's nothing without its youth culture. I used to run around the city and it was cheap, there were young people everywhere, it was full of potential. The city used to make you say things, but there's no support for that now—the only voice you hear is through the Internet, and nobody's saying anything original. People are

duller, and the optimism that we had even in the early 2000s is gone. Even Bushwick is tasteful-totalitarian. The city has been cut up, with people being priced out of all the boroughs, so the same people stick together and there are no conversations between different factions.

We're creating more and more "others" every day, by not feeling and not connecting with our own humanity. *That's* what helps immigrants. It's not just about getting a roof over your head—it's when you get a voice that your life changes.

Stamina addressed a very physical togetherness, through the lens of alternative youth culture. Do you feel that these recent projects—*Continuum*, too—have projected into a more global or universal conversation about youth and about community?

Continuum came out of *Coyote Ugly* and the impression it left on me: it convinced me that immigration is the fastest and best way we have as human beings to evolve, to make people that are more adept at living globally, more of their time and of the world. The worldliest humans are not the ones who stay home.

Cyrus started to worry about death at the time I was working on *Coyote Ugly* and preparing for *Continuum*, and the only thing that gave him peace about it was the thought that if we are connected to other people and things, we never truly die—we are an extension of many who came before us and evolve and mutate with each generation. *Continuum* was my way of connecting to that universal impulse to connect and to survive beyond our bodily demise. This requires memory, education, and an awareness that each of us contributes to culture and human knowledge through our actions in life, and through being together. So, when I make art, it's never an expression that is independent from others who have spoken, who made art and moved before I did. We're all humans. We love our families and our friends and our food. I love humans too much to think we don't have heart and curiosity—to think it's anything more than geopolitical situations preventing us from meeting each other.

Caia Hagel is a writer, pop culture critic, creative director, and nomad.