

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Azimi, Negar, "Nothing and Everything at Once", Parkett, 2011

Andro Wekua

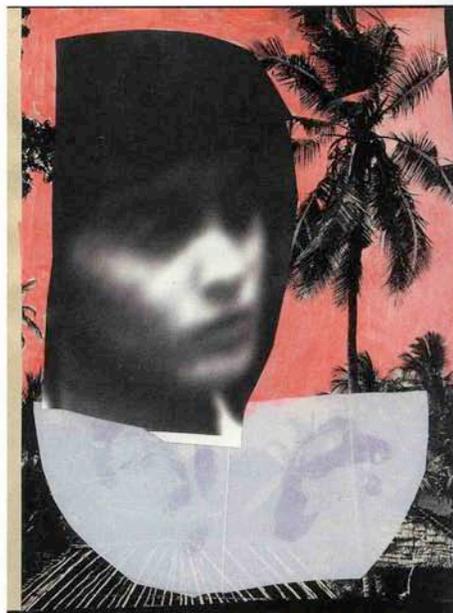
NOTHING AND EVERYTHING AT ONCE

NEGAR AZIMI

When I first met Andro Wekua, I found him shy and standoffish. He would stare at me with his large eyes as if I were the least interesting person in the room, or speaking gibberish, which was a bummer since he had just started going out with one of my friends. Years later, we spoke about it, and I learned that his English (Wekua is Georgian) just hadn't been all that good back then. As it happens, his English has gotten a great deal better, and we have spoken more.

In *The Years* (1937), the last novel Virginia Woolf published in her lifetime, the author recounts the story of a single English family and all the trials and tribulations they endured over the course of some fifty years. Rather than being epic or encyclopedic in scope, Woolf's story is strangely insular, rarely straying beyond the bounds of Britain and mostly built around seemingly insignificant details: the mood, what someone was wearing, the color of the sky. At the very end, all of Woolf's characters are assembled

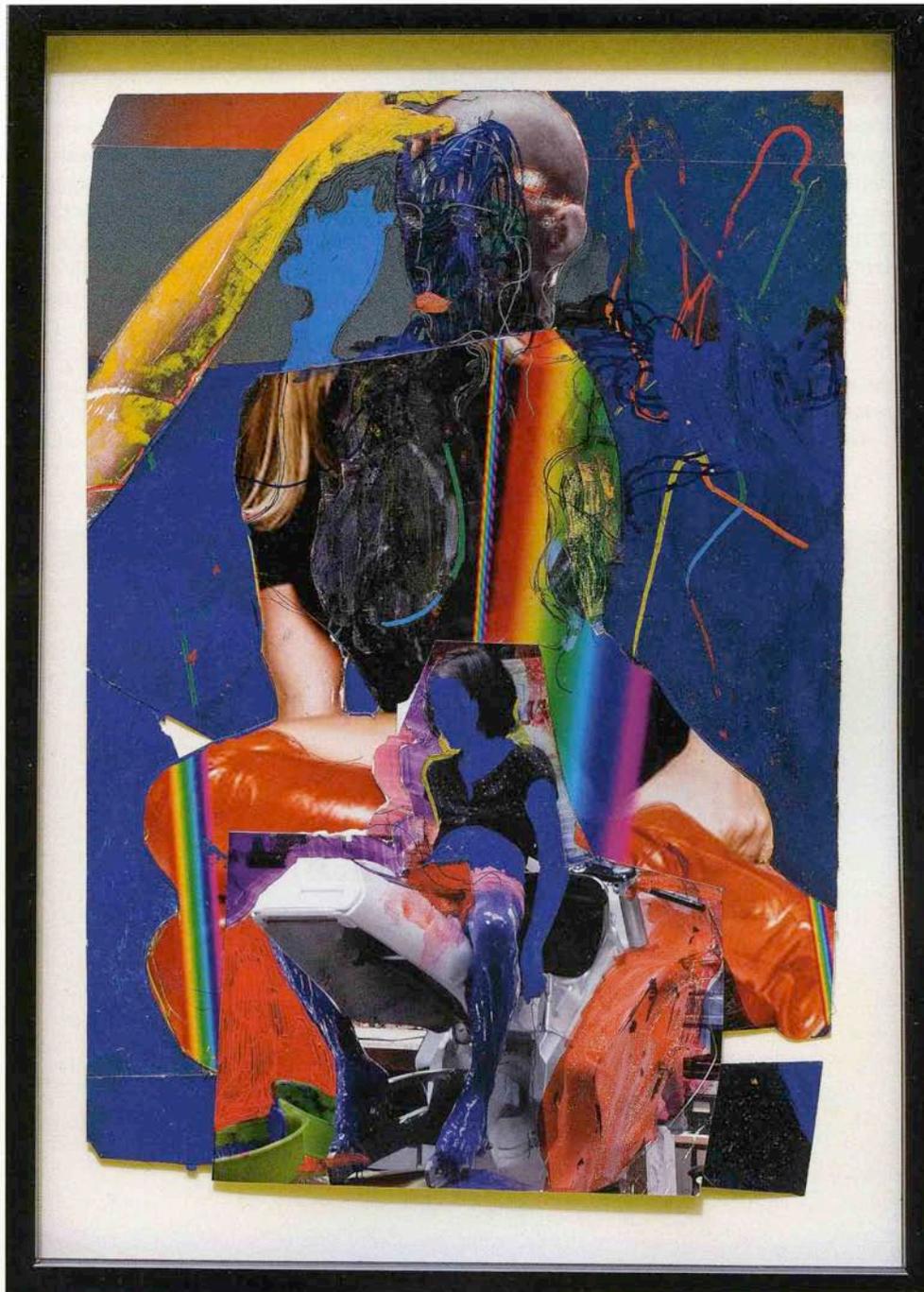
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ANDRO WEKUA, MY BIKE AND YOUR SWAMP (YESTERDAY) 2, 2008, felt pen, paint marker, colored pencil, ball pen on photo, 12 x 11 1/4" /
MEIN FAHRRAD UND DEIN SUMPF (GESTERN) 2, Filzstift, Marker, Farbstift, Kugelschreiber auf Photographie, 30,5 x 20,3 cm.

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at a family reunion. Some have married; others have aged terribly and are hobbling about; a few have died. The reader is left wondering what happened in the intervening years—left to fill in the gaps.

Wekua's world is not unlike that of *The Years*—for we, too, are left to fill in gaping holes the size of a lifetime. Like Woolf, Wekua reveals the color of the sky, the size of a girl's foot, the mood in the air. In his monographic book project *If There Ever Was One* (2007), we encounter fragments of a biographical text sprinkled throughout, but we are never told

much. There is a girl. She is by the sea. The sky around her turns from red to purple to indigo to black. She has, at one time, stared death in the face. Beyond that, little is revealed. It is hard to tell if these fragments are drawn from Wekua's life, a film, or a dream someone had; it is all frustratingly opaque.

In this way, Wekua's paintings, collages, films, sculptures, texts, and ephemeral miscellanea bring together diverse geographies, histories, and characters, each woven into a quilt all of his own. There are images, some drawn from the artist's personal

ANDRO WEKUA, GET OUT OF MY ROOM, PART 1, 2006, wax figure, artificial hair, fabric, leather, wax paint, wooden table, wax, bronze chair, enamel; 8 silk screen prints, etching, exhibition view Kunstmuseum Winterthur / RAUS AUS MEINEM ZIMMER, Wachsfigur, künstliches Haar, Textilien, Leder, Wachsfarbe, Holztisch, Wachs, Bronzestuhl, Emailfarbe; 8 Siebdrucke, Radierung, Ausstellungsansicht.



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albums, others simply found or appropriated—from postcards, books, television. These images belong to him, but more compellingly, they belong to all of us.

Wekua's mannequins and sculptures, mostly fashioned from wax, are similarly generous. As if frozen in time, the majority of his figures seem to be caught in the prime of youth—not quite teenagers, not quite children. And yet something is still invariably off about them: a hand missing, a tongue dangling, a nose elongated, cheeks painted with superfluous rouge. Sometimes, eyes are blotched out, painted over—removed? It is not clear. Each figure evokes something we have all felt: loneliness, inferiority, our heads hanging over our knees in a gesture of quiet defeat.

The sculpture *WIE HEISST DU MEIN KIND?* (What is Your Name My Child? 2004) portrays a young man dressed in what appears to be a standard school uniform complete with crisp white shirt and black tie. He stands on an oversized black ceramic pedestal with arms slightly akimbo, his hands coated in dirty grey. Has he been playing in the mud? Building something? Getting in a fight? His eyes are covered by gratuitous white paint. Or again, gouged out, depending on your sensibility. The pedestal: in one sense, it looks like any pedestal. In another, it evokes the black box found in the cockpit of an airplane to record the dialogue between pilot and co-pilot during their flight. But perversely, it only becomes relevant (or makes itself known) in the case of a disaster; its use is latent until then and it is disaster that spells out the terms of its use. In other words, this is not the standard pedestal or support system for a work of art, but rather, a curious, ghostly landmark.

There are other examples. *GET OUT OF MY ROOM* (2006) presents a young man, his eyes equally lacerated. He appears sanguine, his legs crossed on a large ping-pong table in a gesture of relaxation. Or is it resignation? In *SNEAKERS 1* (2008), a figure is bent with her head burrowed between her legs, the outline of a masked face inscribed on her back. She wears sneakers, a sartorial gesture that brings her epic sadness back to earth—back to all of us.

There are masks throughout these works, too, their function not unlike the obliterated eyes. When you put on a mask, you can be anyone. Likewise,

without eyes, Wekua's mannequin is rendered anonymous, generic. Equally, without eyes, the relationship of object to viewer is rendered asymmetrical. The encounter between the two is about one person seeing. It is about being able to project whatever we want onto these little men or little women. For the mannequins, staring back is not a possibility. That privilege is reserved for viewers.

The first line in the late Armenian-Georgian filmmaker Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1966) announces: "This is a poetic dream." From here, we are drawn into the life of Ivan and Marichka, two children whose families are divided by a blood feud. Having fallen in love early on, they manage to bridge the divide and eventually plan to marry. When Ivan sets off to find work, Marichka tumbles into a river and dies. Ivan sinks into a depression, weeping for his lost love, hallucinating her presence everywhere, and wasting away. He eventually goes mad, before finally joining Marichka again in death.

It is not uncommon to turn to filmic metaphors when thinking about Wekua's works. Like a set of film stills, there is a hint of what was and what is to come. But more potently, the works convey a profoundly personal emotional aura, making us feel that we have trespassed or stepped into a room we were not meant to enter. Wekua's use of color—deep reds, purples, browns—heightens the sensation of place, of a highly coded, highly idiosyncratic universe.

Wekua's monographic book *Lady Luck* (2008) stars an omniscient narrator who says: "He had lost his memory, and this prevented him from moving. It was as if someone had clicked the pause button during a movie."¹ This sensation of not moving, of being frozen in time, is at least one characteristic of memory. Memory, of course, is subject to slippage, to fragmentation. Wekua's works verge on sculptural manifestations of memories; they are not reflections of memories, but rather their built manifestation. They are fashioned from scraps of family photographs, popular imagery, conversations. In other words, they are not unlike memory, which is also a pastiche, circumscribed by photographs, endlessly repeated stories and dreams—just as true as they are false. Colored pencils—like a child's—also inform the work, shading in spaces in and around the images.

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ANDRO WEKUA, SNEAKERS 1 (PURPLE SNEAKERS), 2008, wax figure, aluminum cast table, pallet, acrylic board, ceramic, shoes, 59 x 72 ⁷/₈ x 39 ¹/₂, exhibition view Gladstone Gallery, New York / TURNSCHUHE 1 (LILA TURNSCHUHE), Wachsfigur, Aluminiumgusstisch, Palette, Akrylharzbrett, Keramik Schuhe, 150 x 185 x 100 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.

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Wekua is presently working on the architectural history of the city in which he was raised, Sukhumi, a seaside resort town that was once part of the Republic of Georgia but is today occupied by Russia. In the 1990s, Sukhumi was at the heart of an ethnic cleansing campaign. Wekua's family, like many others, left—and he hasn't been back since. The city has been left mostly empty, like a ravaged carcass. It is a pale imitation of what it once was. Its glamorous buildings damaged by war are now mostly abandoned. Perhaps a bit like Beirut, Sukhumi exists as a memory of its former glory.

For years, Wekua has been culling anything he could find about contemporary Sukhumi from the internet. But as it happens, it is very difficult to find anything on the city, as Sukhumi's public image is fiercely guarded by the Russian state. Wekua shares and exchanges the photos he finds with his family and friends.

Recently, his brother sent him an image of the house they grew up in. In this image, the city looks like an empty stage, a set between acts, waiting for a past to reassert itself. It is as if the present had never come. Wekua has recreated some of these buildings as sculptures, allowing their online popularity and the particular resonance they may have for him to inform his selection. Each is cast as an individual object, with its own life and fashioned from its own material: aluminum, wax, bronze, or resin. In order to make the buildings three dimensional, Wekua relies on his own memory as well Google Maps of Sukhumi, which have only recently become available. When he cannot find pictures of facades or when his memory fails, the structures are simply left blank, leaving only one-dimensional surfaces. In this way, the resuscitated buildings are faithful to the delicate workings of memory, not to mention the limitations of the internet. Like one of Albertine's wandering beauty spots in Marcel Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower, 1919), they are not static; the author can't keep track of exactly where the mole has fallen on her fine face! And like the artist who is reluctant to speak, they offer nothing and everything at once.

1) Andro Wekua, *Lady Luck* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2008), p. 31.