

Shir Cohen + Olivia Sterling: Rage Comics

15 July – 2 September 2023



BONES ARE FOR DOGS, MEAT IS FOR MEN (2023)
OLIVIA STERLING

Huxley-Parlour are pleased to announce *Rage Comics*, a two-person exhibition by Shir Cohen and Olivia Sterling. The exhibition at Huxley-Parlour's Maddox Street space visually references a Butcher's shop, or perhaps a slaughterhouse, as both artists channel their own personal rage through the language of flesh, meat and the carnal.

The title of the exhibition, alludes to the duality of the artists' approach to their subject matter: of anger channelled through a comedic lens. It also directly refers to the digital cartoon strips - 'Rage Comics' - that use a set of pre-made cartoon characters, known as 'rage faces'. These cartoons were most prevalent in the early 2010s but still exist in the fabric of many digital subcultures today. They are crudely drawn, often made in Microsoft Paint and follow simple story lines, often, but not exclusively, expressing rage.

With this exhibition, Cohen and Sterling are seeking to reclaim and redirect this rage. Both artists share a fascination with the use of cartoons and memes by hate-groups in digital spaces, with a particular focus on the 'Manosphere', namely Incel culture and the alt-right. These groups view the world through the lens of genetics, racial and gendered stereotypes, as well as sharing a particular sense of humour. Cohen and Sterling investigate memes' unique position in straddling both humour and hate. The term 'meme' – originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to describe elements of culture that are distributed by imitation – now denotes a shared digital image culture. Simplistic, reductive, and easily manipulated, memes are transformed by the addition of text, moving freely between trivial, absurdist or political, as they are circulated through digital spaces.

Cohen and Sterling are interested in what happens to memes in the hands of those seeking to spread racist and sexist ideologies, and how the visual language of memes seems to enable this. The artists address the widespread use of irony, satire and ridicule in meme culture as a method of legitimising, normalising, or at the very least obscuring, misogynist or racist beliefs.

In their work more broadly, Shir Cohen collects stories and incidents that relate to experiences of oppressed groups, especially Jewish and Queer, as part of their own sense of otherness. Olivia Sterling investigates blackness and whiteness in contemporary Britain. Her paintings use humour and slapstick to critique racialised ways of seeing, including the semantics of race.

Using the reductive and dehumanising language that is often used against marginalised groups, Cohen presents strange animal-human hybrids, that writhe and strut on the gallery's walls. These creatures, rendered in the low-res, simplistic visual language of the online image economy, draw on the culturally established symbolism of meme culture, but also connect to Phrenology which invites discrimination by linking certain groups to animals to justify this dehumanisation.

Sterling inverts these dehumanising metaphors through her suite of accompanying paintings. The compositions take the form of figures grinding troublingly human-looking meat into sausages. The polished, counter-top grinders reveal white, male bodies as the source of these pallid, phallic sausages. Sterling here uses comedy, her own brand of cartoonish slapstick, as well as theatrical gore, to channel complex emotions about the nature of power and the patriarchy. The paintings refer to Lincolnshire sausages, a nod to Spalding, Lincolnshire, a constituency with historic ties to UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party, a far-right British political party), and the place in which Sterling grew up. Sterling uses these imagined spaces for butchery to enact violent fantasies around race and revenge. While Cohen makes creatures that reference past ideologies that seek to render marginalised people as animals in order to dehumanise them, Sterling renders the authors of these ideologies as mere meat to be played with, even consumed.

Cohen and Sterling's exhibition considers contemporary conversations surrounding humour, shock, violence and the expression, or suppression, of anxieties. By borrowing from, and subverting, the language found in online spaces for hate, Cohen and Sterling channel an external rage at the empire, as well as their own internal rage that they may well share with the men and boys found in Incel groups and other far-right subcultures.

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HUXLEY-PARLOUR, 45 Maddox Street, London W1S 2PE

Opening, Friday 14 July, 6–8pm

Opening Hours Monday to Friday, 10:00am - 5:30pm

Saturdays, 10:00am - 1:00pm

Entry is free

More information can be found online at www.huxleyparlour.com