

LIZZI BOUGATSOS

Selected Press

Life long scavenger hunt - in conversation with artist Lizzi Bougatsos

Lizzi Bougatsos is a multidisciplinary artist/musician mostly known as a singer of Gang Gang Dance.



PHOTO BY KUBIAT NNAMDIE

Lizzi is Greek-American artist born in Queens, New York. Her body of work incorporates sculpture, collage, installation, writing, music and performance. Either on paper or live, she is very loud, chaotic, humorous and sharp. Lizzi's Greek origin often makes cameo especially when it comes to collages. Seeing Gyros, Tzatziki and a fair amount of awkward ad posters is nothing unusual when it comes to her practice. Bougatsos life is one big scavenger hunt. She collects things she finds on the streets, things she finds while traveling and all these "things" at one point become something more. Her work has been shown at James Fuentes LLC – New York, American

Fine Arts, Co, Whitney Biennial – Whitney Museum of America Art, *KW* Institute for Contemporary Art – Berlin and most recently at Boo-Hooray in Montauk, NYC.

Lizzi, what made you want to be an artist and enroll in art school?

I went to art school as sort of a fluke. The rave scene in New York City was big in the early 90's, and frankly, I was scared of it, so I jumped on my first offer to go to art school which was a full tuition scholarship situation. I was already taking life drawing classes at FIT. I was bored with the traditional program, fascinated more with immediate reactions to happening type performances in rural situations such as malls where I would film myself walking around with ceramic guns sewn on my clothes in Middle America or filming myself eating in restaurants. That piece was called, "The Fallacies of Food." I started performing with props, was rhyming with my writings. I began opening for bands with my spoken word at the punk club. In between school, I did a summer program in Southampton and met Jerry Saltz. I showed him my sculptures, but then I opened my mouth and started spitting my lyrics. His advice was to quit college immediately and move back to the city. Of course, I finished school and didn't listen to him. He still has never seen me perform which I don't mind at all. I consider him one of my greatest mentors.

*Is **Gang Gang Dance** an art performance or is it a musical group?*

Gang Gang Dance is very much a musical group.

Tell me more about Angelblood.

Angelblood started in an elevator in the meat packing district. Well, that's where we came up with the name. Rita Ackerman asked Jess Holzworth to make an album. She rented a studio in upstate NY. We documented the recording with photos and made an album. Jess eventually left New York, so Rita and I continued the band as we wanted to keep performing and curating art shows. This led us to Europe where we performed impromptu in Paris at the Purple Institute, All Tomorrow's Parties curated by Sonic Youth and various other festivals in Holland and St. Gallen. After we had recorded Labia Minora, Gang Gang got real busy, and we had to prioritize. My boyfriend at the time was playing in Angelblood and Gang Gang, so we were getting burnt out going to rehearsals uptown in Harlem for Angelblood, then downtown to Williamsburg for Gang Gang practice. Jess sort of stopped performing with us after our Mass of the Daggers album because I went off with her ex-boyfriend. Our friendship has come back around as we were also creative partners in the collaborative duo Boug & Worth. We have an art exhibition at Balice Hertling this coming October.

*And then **I. U. D.** what was that about? How does each group/performance differ from one another?*

With Angelblood done, I was pretty much full on Gang Gang. I was on a plane coming back from Japan with the band and saw OOIOO and some other Yoshimi-related drummer groups, AI and decided I wanted to get better at drumming. I heard Sadie was drumming in D.C. in some bands and I asked her if she wanted to jam. That was 2005. We had to come up with a name because people were asking us to gig. We liked EUD because it was so weird, but then we decided on I.U.D. as we figured the periods in-between were up to the audience to name us. Obviously, an I.U.D. is also a sperm blocking contraceptive. It was also the name of a radioactive bomb.



What's the craziest thing you've ever done?

The craziest thing I have ever done was probably a fire stunt I attempted on my body as a protest against the music industry. I am scarred for life for what a friend called "A punk protest."

When was the last time you got into trouble?

I got pulled over yesterday.

Did you always practice art even when other projects were popping up more?

I write ideas and lyrics all the time, but my art practice varies as my performances require a lot of preparation. I get discouraged with making physical objects often. Money is usually a factor. Production costs often hold me back.

When are you more confident, when performing or when you do art and show that to the public?

I am much more confident when I am performing unless I really like a piece like Working Class Bird. Then I don't really give a fuck.

What kind of reaction do you hope to get from people?

I usually get reactions from people that I want and much more pleasant surprises and commentary, but I always want more out of myself. A Euphoria does come out of a great performance, though. If the elements are right, I am high for days.

Do you still collect things and then make your art of that?

I do. Collecting garden tools, bird cages, and white fabric at the moment, and songs and words of course.

Are you still into hair?

I hate my hair.

What is your favorite possession?

My favorite possession is probably my “save your skin” spray. I am obsessed with essential oils, psychic power and shamanism on a daily basis.

How do your parents feel about the work you make?

My parents have finally come around with my mom as my biggest fan. She actually used to sit in on Angelblood practice. She also collects slate and pine cones for me, and stores my work on Long Island.

Do you still write journals? What was the last thing you wrote down?

I can't tell which thing I wrote down last was. My final elegance, Saturn is the sixth planet from the sun, like a pope with the computer in 2001 or Queen of the South, a new show on Netflix.

What is your favorite part of the day?

I like the early morning where I am half dreaming.

Do you feel like an adult?

No.

What is your greatest superstition?

I still don't like a hat on the bed.

Interview: Katja Horvat

Photos: Courtesy of the artist

ON SITE

FLAMING CREATURES

Paige K. Bradley on Lizzi Bougatsos



View of “Lizzi Bougatsos: Idolize the Burn, an Ode to Performance,” 2023, Tramps, New York. Wall: *Egypt with Blue*, 2022. Floor: *The Last Studio*, 2022. Photo: Mark Woods.

TRASH AND VAUDEVILLE. It’s the name of a store on New York’s East Seventh Street that opened in 1975 and “has been providing Rock n’ Roll to wear ever since.” In Lizzi Bougatsos’s latest show, “Idolize the Burn, an Ode to Performance,” the musician, performer, and artist transforms one such provision into *The Crucifixion*, 2022—a black leather brassiere augmented with underglaze ceramic and a man’s necktie. A stained, shopworn tag names the boutique and its most conventionally attractive detail: the original price of \$26.

Props for performance—including toe shoes, a music stand, paper fans, a taffeta'd bodysuit—appear throughout Bougatsos's exhibition at Tramps in New York. Staged in sculptures and assemblages, these found, outsourced, or otherwise not entirely handmade objects or details bring about calculated distancing effects. Though a memento of dance or a delicate accessory can be charming, this show is not so much endearing as it is an invitation to become unsettled, brushed up against by knives (literally and metaphorically), or confronted with signs of affliction and ruin. This is the heated *raison d'être* of a hushed installation in which the immaculate bloodred painted floor of the whole gallery—just off the south side of Washington Square Park—stays intact thanks to a polite request that visitors remove their shoes upon entrance. Treading lightly, then, prompts a sensitivity to this show as a space for reflection on the wreckages and deprivations of time and pain and their attendant gifts of introspection and perspective. The work goes against the grain of the “experiential” or “immersive” that is so modish in art today: No boring, reality-denying headset required. Use your own head instead. DIY.

For my money, perfume is already amply experiential, and upon entering the installation one detects the faint whiff of some aroma. Two upturned bottles of Christian Dior's Poison role-play the lightbulbs of a wall sconce in *Egypt with Blue*, 2022; *The Unseen*, 2022, a multitiered, low-hanging, and indisputably dangerous brass-and-silver-bladed arrangement, also includes a small bottle of a Thierry Mugler scent on its top rack. Another sculpture, *Her Refrigerator (Preserved Forever)*, 2022, evokes a cooler kind of sensuality: A sheet of clear Mylar swathes a bouquet of flasks and vials, all set atop a low, plain acrylic stand. A tiny YSL-capped vessel shrinks in the presence of a full-size bottle of Tom Ford Black Orchid, along with yet another weighted round of Poison and a number of boxes of oud. These are not the scents of a wallflower but of someone who will be seen and heard—and linger after they're gone, inspiring a sense of loss in those left behind, or burnt through.

In the vicinity, another arrangement, also shrouded in Mylar, offers feathers, a fan, fake floral bits, and visibly used, chipped and dinged drumsticks—the artist is also a percussionist and vocalist—on an Alexander McQueen product-box plinth. Speaking of death, allusions to damages are part and parcel of the *mise-en-scène* here. Some two decades ago, the artist played with fire in a performance and was left with massive and painful burns. Oblique references to the incident populate the installation: In *A Punk Gesture*, 2019–23, two oddly sutured short-sleeved tops that turn out to be burn suits rest on a piece of fabric-covered cardboard and on the floor, recalling a Susan Cianciolo installation tactic. Nearby, *Untitled, Diptych*, 2019, features a clinical arrangement of yellowed silicone patches affixed to canvas with brown packing tape. The gleam of the plastic encasing these scraps, set just a bit back from another slight glare of

framing glass, is optically similar to the wetness of an open wound. You can't miss what this is about—this is trashed flesh transubstantiated, preserved, conserved, and saved. Thanks to the uncanny corporeality of these materials—note the gelling and oozing of the semi-sheer tape's adhesive—they perform the role of the artist's own burned body. She doesn't need these dressings anymore. Rather than explicitly display the truth (backstory is a rote narrative convention today), Bougatsos lets it linger on the scene lambently, allegorically, or like an odor meant to keep away the bullshit. Motion pictures might have killed vaudeville, but lest we forget: Coming back from the dead is a great gimmick. To walk through the fire and still idolize it—that might even be sacred.

“Lizzi Bougatsos: Idolize the Burn, an Ode to Performance” is on view through March 22.

Paige K. Bradley is an artist and writer based in New York.

FRIEZE

Lizzi Bougatsos Plays with Fire

At TRAMPS, New York, the stalwart of the Lower East Side art and music scenes transmutes a painful personal archive into new assemblages

BY MADELEINE SEIDEL IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 10 MAR 23



Lizzi Bougatsos, the artist, musician and downtown troubadour, performed a piece in 2001 at age 27 that included fire: a youthful and dramatic representation of her disillusionment with the art and music worlds. The performance went awry when Bougatsos's costume caught aflame, causing severe burns throughout her body. That fateful night, and the following months of excruciating recovery, are immortalized in her show 'Idolize the Burn, An Ode to Performance' at TRAMPS's new space in New York. The exhibition is a tribute not only to that singular performance but to Bougatsos's beginnings and existence as an artist, showcasing her life as a *gesamtkunstwerk* dedicated to chasing the euphoria of artistic expression and belonging.



Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn: An Ode to Performance', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and TRAMPS, New York and London; photograph: Mark Woods

Bougatsos has been a fixture of the New York arts scene for decades. Best-known for her work in music, as part of the band Gang Gang Dance, she has collaborated with artists such as Rita Ackermann (*Angelblood*, 2014) and Jonas Mekas (*A Dance with Fred Astaire*, 2018), and has exhibited her visual and performance art internationally. Instead of centring her music and time-based work, however, this exhibition focuses on Bougatsos's sculpture and assemblage, particularly the readymades pertaining to her injury and slow recovery. The majority of these objects are bandages, as seen in pieces such as *Skin Drawing II (I Prefer the Floor)* (2022), made of nylon, silicone and fabric that mimic quilted animal hide. By using her personal injury archive as material in these works, Bougatsos asserts authority over her experience, transforming the stained, normally disposed-of skeins of medical-grade fabric into a document of her resilience.



Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn: An Ode to Performance', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and TRAMPS, New York and London; photograph: Mark Woods

Although Bougatsos frames the exhibition as a monument to that life-changing 2001 performance, the most poignant moments of the show come when the artist drills deeper into her biography and analyzes the beginnings of her artistic life as a child. The ballet shoe – a remnant of her adolescent ballet training – is a constant motif throughout the exhibition, serving as a symbol of her punishing commitment to her art. In one of the larger chandelier pieces in the exhibition, *Stalinist Couture over the Mother* (2022), she covers the shoes in wax and resin, combining the pain of her past and present artistic pursuits in a sly critique of the perfection and artifice required of female performers of all ages.



Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn: An Ode to Performance', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and TRAMPS, New York and London; photograph: Mark Woods

In the main exhibition space is an assemblage entitled *Sad Violin* (2022). A cheap music stand and a paper fan encased in a plastic frame about a carefully placed photograph of Bougatsos as a child sitting before a mirror on a 1970s shag carpet, simultaneously enraptured and confused by her reflection. In a detail too perfect to fabricate, an inflatable clown toy jeers in the background of the image, as if an omen of the artist's Sisyphean journey of constant reinvention ahead.



Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn: An Ode to Performance', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and TRAMPS, New York and London; photograph: Mark Woods

Photographs from Bougatsos's personal archive abound in the space. *First Band, Russia* (1976/2022), which comprises a polaroid of the artist's first performance with her band, leans gingerly against the wall atop an electric socket. This single image captures a moment of self-actualization in its most primal stages: her face reflects equal parts joy and horror. It crystallizes the fact that this exhibition is an ode not to performance but to performer – a celebration of Bougatsos's personal strength and perennial innovation in pursuit of the spotlight.

Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn, An Ode to Performance', is on view at TRAMPS until 22 March.

Main image: Lizzi Bougatsos, 'Idolize the Burn: An Ode to Performance', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and TRAMPS, New York and London; photograph: Mark Woods