

# Live by Night

The installations, collages and films of **Andro Wekua** construct a filmic dream-space of violent fantasies and sexual perversion *by Eva Díaz*

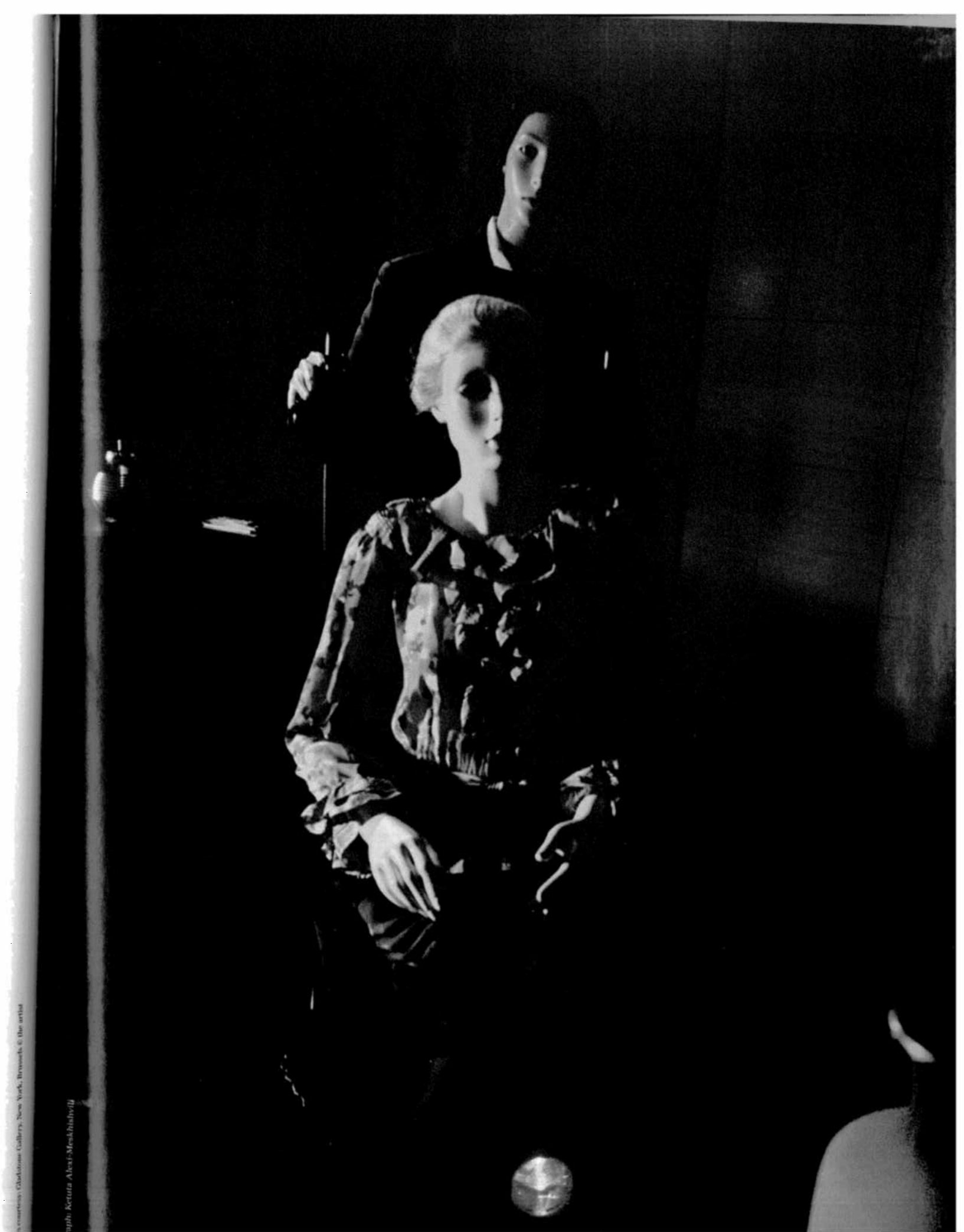


This page and opposite:  
*Never Sleep with a Strawberry in Your Mouth*

If you want to tumble into Andro Wekua's head-space, start by watching Sam Fuller's 1964 film *The Naked Kiss*. It's got a hot, bald hooker robbing her drunken pimp after beating him senseless with a handbag. It's got our now reformed hooker nursing cute children (not just any kids, but *handicapped* kids, their vulnerability exploited for full sensational effect). It's got a tall, dark and handsome pillar of the community sexually abusing little girls. And, as icing on the cake, it's got our pissed-off ex-hooker heroine bashing him to death with a rotary telephone. Believe me, *The Naked Kiss* is a first-class ticket to the slutty perversities and deeply pathological fracasos of Wekua's work.

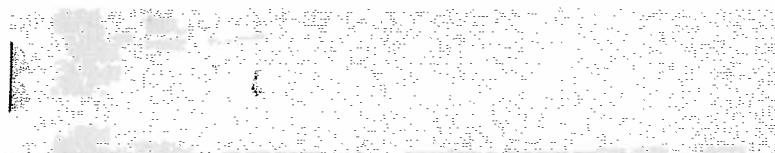
The young Georgian artist isn't all B-movie noir melodrama, though. Nearly anything that came out in Europe in, say, 1960 to 1964 - *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Boccaccio '70* (1962), *Red Desert* (1964) etc. - will hasten your trip into Wekuaworld. He loves nothing more than wing eyeliner and a little black Chanel dress on a razor-cheekboned, ennui-stricken cinema goddess. But glamour is just one lipstick-smearing slap or black eye away from degradation and pathos. That's what dark sunglasses are for. That's why 'they live by night' - 'they' the pulp movie stars.

Like Richard Hamilton, Ray Johnson and John Stezaker, Wekua understands that collage is a medium particularly suited to capturing the fine shades of experience between a come-hither pout and a split lip. And collage-painting hybrids do this best of all. The blotchy daubs, and sometimes watery washes of paint applied over silkscreened images of women and (infrequently) men appropriated from the Sam Fuller-John Cassavettes milieu move Wekua's subjects between sleek-pop and sinister-grotesque in quick circuits. Hamilton and Johnson are godfathers to Wekua's treatment of sullied icons and debonaire scoundrels; they too saw painting and collage as ways to slow the media flow of cinema, of star magazines, billboards, posters and advertising, to reveal that the truth of the image resides not on

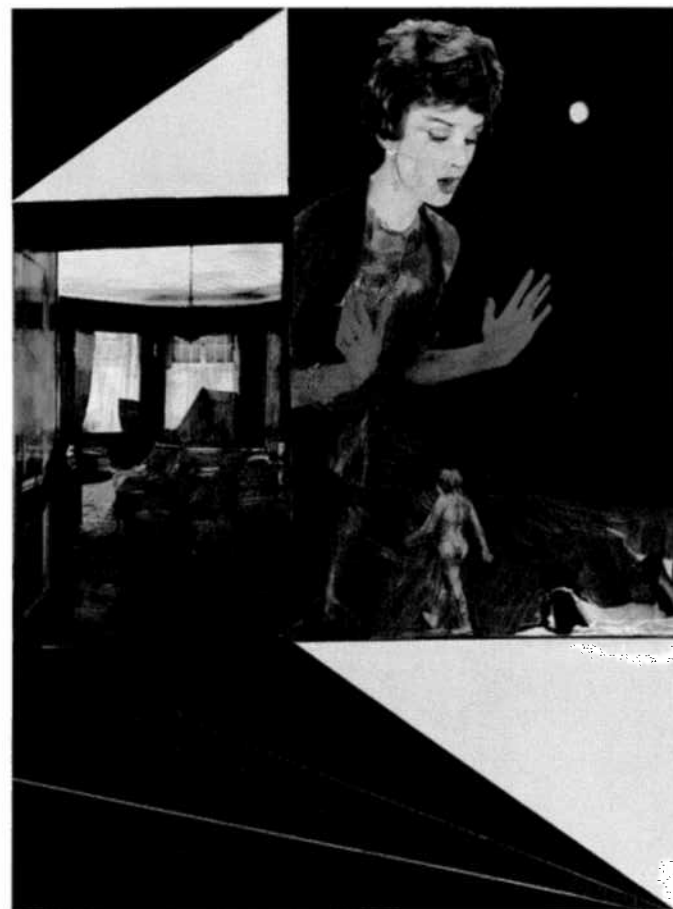


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**Wekua is compelled by the rougher stuff of life – a vision of a starlet on the toilet or a graffito's phallic marks.**



**Yellow Hair**  
2009  
Collage, ball pen, colour pen, illustration, pencil, photograph, spray paint and wax crayon on paper  
49x41 cm



**Lying, Walking, Swimming**  
2005  
Collage, pencil, colour pencil, and felt pen on photocopy  
46x35 cm

phallic marks defacing the market-tested movie poster, or of a cutesy child model juxtaposed with porn. Think Kenneth Anger's 1959 book *Hollywood Babylon*, in which the avant-garde filmmaker (and former child actor) compiled a dossier of salacious tales of sleazy celebrity behaviour.

Take a work like *Lying, Walking, Swimming* (2005). An elegant early 1960s woman – with, you guessed it, wing eyeliner – wears a fetching blue halter neck dress and elaborate rhinestone chandelier earrings. She looms over a tableau that includes a reclining naked woman in black stilettos, a naked girl-child striding away from the viewer, and a dolphin frolicking in the same streak of yellow paint as the other two tiny figures. Neon pink palms extended, the giantess makes a gesture of either surprise or defense; looking down on the scene, her open mouth emits a stream of white, snake-like hatch marks. Emits or receives – you can't be sure. The blow-job connotation comingles with associations of old Renaissance pictures in which the word of God comes down through a dove as a bunch of proto-language scribbles, like a Fra Angelico painting.

Never one to keep it simple, Wekua outfits *Lying, Walking, Swimming's* bottom section with a radial array of blue, red, green and white triangular slices of paint limned with pink – a graphic abstraction that calls to mind a mid-1960s Frank Stella. To the right of the towering woman is an appropriated photograph of an interior architectural scene depicting a ritzy drawing room with parquet floors, candelabras, and a chandelier, coloured in thin washes of translucent pink, blue, and green paint. Above this photograph is a rectangle bifurcated into two triangles: one black, one white. This white triangle is a perfect inversion of the white area in the Stella passage below – the two adulterated photographic collages are framed by the surrounding abstractions.

To get a sense of Wekua's colour in this image, and more par-



**Get Out of My Room Part 1**  
2006  
Mixed media  
Installation via Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 20

wall-sized mural of the surface of Mars (to the churning sounds of Iron Butterfly's 1968 psych-rock track 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida'). Though pretty much anything by Mann will do; the lurid *Ur-1980s* neon style in *Manbunter* holds tremendous sway over Wekua's night club-illuminated greens and sherbet oranges. But Wekua uses colour so savagely, so luridly, that he can make Michael Mann look like he's Amish. Wekua has himself lately moved into filmmaking. His first film, *Never Sleep with a Strawberry in Your Mouth* (2010), is involved in the rich intertext of images of sex and childhood and glamour that appear in his other works.

The high artifice of Wekua's photocollage style doesn't even begin to get into the weirdness of the artist's sculptures, many of which make their way into his two-dimensional works as installation shots appropriated alongside his primary source material of mid-century advertisements and film stills. Most of these sculptures use partially-clothed child-like mannequins whose eyes have been obscured with a thick impasto of brightly coloured putty, and whose lips have been grotesquely overdrawn into clown-like leers. One character recurs with eerie frequency: a seated dark-haired boy with his feet propped on a map desk, reclining low in a tubular steel chair, or seated upright in a rocking chair (in the latter case he's ensconced in a large brick and Perspex vitrine that doubles as a small room). In some instances he's wearing a long-sleeved white shirt – a schoolboy shirt – or a slouchy sweater reminiscent of the one worn by the boy Antoine in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959). But in each iteration he's got no trousers. Stranger still, he's still wearing shoes and socks. Dress shoes. We all know it's well-nigh impossible to take trousers off without removing your shoes first. So this bare-legged look is intentional. We're all adults here, he's a boy: we're in sexual fetish territory. Paedophilia stuff. Sometimes the boy has a bit of plastic or cellophane tucked around his neck. That's all right, it's



**Neighbour**  
2009  
Collage, ball pen, colour pen, illustration, pencil, photograph, spray paint and wax crayon on paper  
33x24 cm

**Wekua's women aren't redeeming angels, they're castrating avengers who must be subjugated or debased.**



**Untitled**  
2010  
Mixed media  
Installation view  
Kunsthalle  
Fridericianum,  
Kassel, 2011



**1995**  
2009  
Oil, spray paint,  
photograph  
and felt pen on  
canvas  
60x60 cm

Hans Bellmer *poupée* territory, inert bodies posed for the viewer's projective sexual fantasies.

Violent fantasies too. It's their violence (and Wekua's obvious talent with the formal arrangements of the polymorphous media he employs in his installations) that rescues, if I can even use that word in this context, these works from the kind of art-history pastiche that's thick on the ground these days. Think of all the references I had to make to get a handle on Wekua's field of citation. He isn't interested in the kind of icy cool appropriation everybody's doing now. He's interested in 'hot' appropriation, in boiling your blood a little with the dream-like perversity of his abuses against women and children. Writings about Wekua claim this has something to do with his Soviet/Georgian temperament, but since when does coming from the former Soviet Union buy you a neo-primitive pass?<sup>1</sup> (Then again, comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's Borat character staged nearby Kazakhstan as ground zero for all kinds of cultural atavisms...)

Wekua's intensity may not redeem the sometimes casual misogyny of these images. Phallic shapes in women's mouths here, clips of women's coochies from porn mags there. Sprinkle liberally with Barbie legs attached to little children. The dream-space of Wekua's narratives is one in which women and young boys are pieced together out of parts of men's fantasies of dominance over others, or out of regressive fears about the lack of sovereignty remembered from a man's own boyhood.

Linking sexual violence and domination as a transgression against the field of power is a familiar strategy, however. You could say it was the Dadaist technique of overturning reason with chaos, or the Surrealists' vision of the unleashing of unconscious desires against the regulations of the symbolic order. But to unleash the

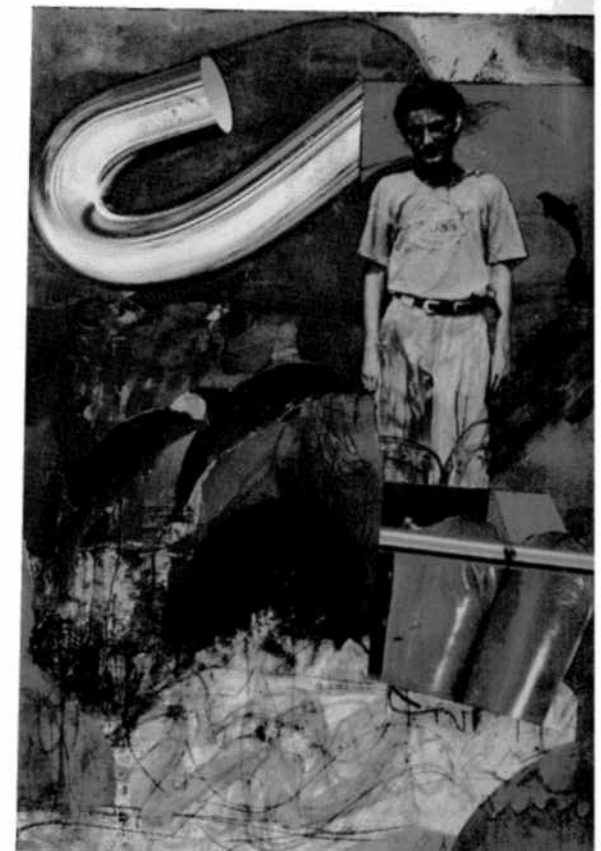


**'Pink Wave Hunts'**  
2011  
Installation view  
Kunsthalle  
Fridericianum,  
Kassel, 2011

or debased. Wekua's compulsive repetition of these degenerated boy-meets-screen-siren motifs may in fact construct a fixed opposition between art practices, on the one hand, and hegemonic social practices, on the other. To attack the order of reason by pursuing seemingly pure emotional authenticity may limit art to the narrow register of psychic turmoil and aggression.

But as the historian Eric Santner has noted, writing on the paranoiac German judge Daniel Paul Schreber, this relationship between transgression and the social order may actually be one of parodic mimicry. That is to say, the sense of order projected by the dominant culture is often just as specious as the impression of disorder and the striving toward chaos cultivated by 'transgressive' practices. As Santner describes it, male debasement is in actuality a kind of domination: 'Impotence can suddenly reverse itself into an awesome power or, better, the way in which impotence reveals itself to be one of the most disturbing attributes of power.'<sup>2</sup> In attempting to maintain art as a zone for the performative power of masculinity, Wekua may be essentially trying to fix a target that's always moving. Critic Michael Wood credits Luis Buñuel for realizing the conceptual shortcomings of this stance: the attempt by avant-gardists to conceive of a rigid social order, to set points of opposition and fixed codes to transgress, misrecognizes the intractable problem of the symbolic order: that it's always changing, and sometimes with a perverted rationality. ●

*Eva Diaz is Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art at Pratt Institute, New York, USA. She is currently working on her book Chance and Design: Experimentation in Art at Black Mountain College, which focuses on the rival methodologies of Josef Albers, John Cage and Buckminster Fuller.*



**1992**  
2009  
Oil, ball pen, coloured  
pencil, illustration lacquer