

## A MAGAZINE *curated by*

A#18

### SIMONE ROCHA CURATES 'GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS' AT LISMORE CASTLE ARTS, IRELAND

Interview by Dan Thawley



Installation view of *Girls, Girls, Girls*  
Photography by Jed Niezgoda

*A conversation between Irish fashion designer and A#18 curator Simone Rocha with A Magazine Curated By Editor-in-Chief Dan Thawley, on the occasion of her first curated exhibition Girls Girls Girls at Lismore Castle Arts, from April 2nd to Oct 30, 2022.*

As Cecilia Alemani's 2022 Biennale *The Milk Of Dreams* attempts to recalibrate the art world's historical gender divide in Venice this year, another time-travelling exhibition in Lismore, Ireland sees a multitude of feminine and feminist world views on show. Cherry-picking icons from the canon of radical 20th century female sculptors and photographers mixed with an array of emerging names, Simone Rocha has curated her first exhibition under the banner title *Girls Girls Girls* – an intergenerational warcry that corresponds well to the fashion designer's own subversive vision of contemporary womanhood, one she has cultivated in over a decade of darkly romantic fashion collections that have explored adolescence, motherhood and female friendship intertwined with her own Sino-Irish heritage.

Known for her worldly tastes in contemporary art, cultivated in no small part by her collector parents John and Odette Rocha, Simone's first foray into large-scale curation comes as no surprise, though is punctuated with unexpected choices. Widely-celebrated art stars like Louise Bourgeois and Roni Horn (both of whose work has been known to hang in Rocha's boutiques) find their place alongside younger artists of her own generation: painters, photographers, video artists and sculptors unafraid to cross disciplines between art and fashion, or portray multi-faceted visions of womanhood that question contemporary identities and expressions of beauty. Hard and soft, domestic, urban, sexual and otherworldly, Rocha's show unites local and international names within a white cube annex of Lismore Castle, the present day Irish seat of the Duke of Devonshire and a building with roots that reach back to the 12th century.

**Dan Thawley** Perhaps, as someone who knows your world, this is an obvious question. But why *Girls Girls Girls*?

**Simone Rocha** When I was bringing together all the artists for this exhibition, it became quite apparent that a lot of them were female artists. Many of the works that I was drawn to were outwardly not very feminine, but almost sweet and saccharine with very dark undertones lurking below. Cassi Namoda's work features two conjoined twins – from afar it's pastel, but upon closer inspection you notice the morose looks on their faces. There's a slightly spooky, provocative take on femininity. I really liked the title *Girls Girls Girls* because it had a very provocative connotation, taking away the softness and the saccharine that you might associate at first glance with some of the works. And it's also a title that I thought linked the diverse range of artists from different eras and ages.

**DT** Could you tell us about working at Lismore Castle? It's such a historic space.

**SR** The gallery is attached to the castle, a beautiful historical building. I was very interested in the fact that the show was set in Ireland, in this surprising place. The actual space is an arts centre beside the castle. I was given free reign with the room, and it had many original features that couldn't be tampered with, but I enjoyed working with those restrictions. There's one main room where we've hung some of the larger works, like Sophie Barber, Genieve Figgis and Harley Weir's pieces. Then there's a smaller, more intimate gallery, where we've also had to do controlled lighting and temperature because we have the Alina Szapocznikow piece, which requires specific conditions. She's with Cindy Sherman and Roni Horn. There's a beautiful stone tower, in which I put Louise Bourgeois because I really thought she's kind of the mother of it all, and she needed her own little room. In the last smaller room, I've asked the artist Josiane M.H. Pozi to screen her film. So everyone is in little couplings, which I think is quite nice.



Lismore Castle, photography by Andrea Jones

**DT** There are quite a lot of artists from [\*A Magazine #18 Curated By Simone Rocha\*](#) in this show. It's really exciting for us to see them come back into your world. Some of them are of course Irish, and others have links to you in other ways. Could you explain some of those more personal relationships?

**SR** I started by looking at photographers because initially when the gallery came to me, they brought in the idea of a photography show. The first ones that came to mind were people like Petra Collins, who I first collaborated with on *A Magazine*. She has given two photographs from a series with her face imposed onto bodies, representing a very personal, dark time in her life. I love that her work transcends photography, in that there's such a narrative backbone and an otherworldly connotation that solidifies the idea of something skin deep. It's the facade and then what's beneath it. So she was one of the first artists. Then there were other artists that I hadn't collaborated with before but knew of their work for many years, such as Dorothy Cross. I actually discovered Lismore through a show she did there once with bathtubs in the chapel, and I really wanted her to come back. The artwork that I've asked from her is a really old, incredible piece made from cows' udders, *Stiletto* (1994). It's a piece that I have admired since I was a teenager, and it was with an Irish private collector, who weirdly I actually ended up knowing, and they lent it back for the show.

And there's people like Cindy Sherman, who I have a relationship but never collaborated with. It really felt poignant to ask her to participate due to the fact that there was such a strong feeling of identity in the show. There are also some really young people like Emily Lynch, a fantastic Irish photographer who did a project with me on my last show, totally unrepresented by anybody. Same with this Irish painter named Sian Costello. She's fantastic and also just graduated last year. I really wanted there to be this spectrum of young and old, alive and passed, bound together by this youthful, provocative undercurrent between each other.



*Eye of Shark (2014), Dorothy Cross*

**DT** The work that you've chosen to publicise the show is a stone painting by Elene Chantladze. Why?

**SR** Yes, she's one of the only artists whose work I hadn't previously seen in physical form. I love that a lot of her work is on cardboard or found objects. That's why we used the stone as the invitation image, which is actually a found pebble. She's an amazing Georgian painter, and I selected six of her works that are all on cardboard. I just love the naïveté of it, and the very obscure storytelling beneath that represents her heritage. She is someone that I hadn't known or worked with before, and discovered on the journey. Similar to Iris Haeussler, whose work I knew but had never met before, and we ended up having fabulous conversations together for the show.



*Untitled, Elene Chantladze*

**DT** Are there any more senses that will be engaged in this experience for people? I'm sure just by going to the castle, in all its majesty and grandeur, there is already a sacred energy in some way or another.

**SR** I would say that the sound of the show is Josi's film. The cold, soft sounds emanating from the film run throughout and transform into sound for the entire space. In terms of smell, one of the main things about Lismore is that it's set within beautiful gardens. This time of year, it'll be wet, and I'm hoping that the smell will be of the dampness and the earth as you walk through the grounds. There's a contrast to the regalia of the castle set in Ireland, and the blank honesty in the sense of place as you enter.

**DT** It is exciting to see such an ambitious show being conceived through the eyes of someone who is not a traditional curator. I suppose for you as a fashion designer, there's almost a different set of guidelines, a bit like doing *A Magazine*, right?

**SR** Exactly, it's this interesting, undefined space. I'm very frank about being a fashion designer in that it is my role and my job, so I really wanted to approach *Girls Girls Girls* in a very honest way. Paul McAree is the curator of Lismore, and he's been brilliant to work with. I've been very fortunate to be working personally with many of the artists, like Sophie Barber and Dorothy Cross, on the show. But even galleries like Hauser & Wirth and Jerry Gorovoy from the Easton Foundation have been incredibly supportive. I truly feel overwhelmingly touched by how generous the artists have been.

Participating artists: Sophie Barber, Louise Bourgeois, Elene Chantladze, Petra Collins, Sian Costello, Dorothy Cross, Genieve Figgis, Iris Haeussler, Eimear Lynch & Domino Whisker, Roni Horn, Cassi Namoda, Sharna Osborne, Josiane M.H. Pozi, Cindy Sherman, Alina Szapocznikow, Harley Weir, Francesca Woodman, Luo Yang

*Girls Girls Girls* is on show at Lismore Castle Arts, Ireland until 30 Oct, 2022.