

Art in America

SELF-RELIANCE

Dena Yago: *Love Has Its Price*, 2014, C-print on aluminum, 16% by 13¾ inches. Courtesy Boatos Fine Art, Sao Paulo.

With understated imagery and subtle verbal allusions, Dena Yago conjures precarious economic conditions.

by Sam Korman

IN DENA YAGO'S photograph *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?* (2014), a pair of mallards swim on a placid body of water. The male, identified by his iridescent green head, trails the more unassuming female. Foliage in the foreground of the image partly obscures the ducks. Crisp light, cast at a low angle, illuminates the scene, conjuring a late fall afternoon. If the image depicts an idyllic natural world, its framing suggests a decidedly urban context. Yago mounted the photograph on a metal grate similar in form to those that cover sidewalk ventilation shafts for New York's subway system.

The title borrows a line from Katy Perry's single "Firework," a clichéd portrayal of hopelessness: "Do you ever feel like a plastic bag / drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?" The lyric imbues the ducks' apparent calm with a sense of melancholy. At the same time, Yago's reference to a cheesy 2010 pop anthem establishes an ironic distance from the work's apparently simple contrast between urban and rural. *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?* is part of a series of similar works depicting waterfowl that were included in a 2014 exhibition at Cubitt, a London nonprofit. Together they constitute a generic vision of a secluded duck pond, like a catalogue of stock images waiting to be employed in an ad campaign.

Currently based in Los Angeles, Yago has been exhibiting widely for the past five years. Her work, which has been shown in galleries around the world, often includes photographs of animals and plants that evoke pastoral settings. Yet, as with *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?*, Yago contextualizes these images in such a way as to convey an urbane, even jaded sensibility, one rooted at least partly in her previous work with the New York-based "trend forecasting" collective K-HOLE. Beginning in 2011, K-HOLE, whose members also included Greg Fong, Sean Monahan, Emily Segal, and Chris Sherron, produced five PDF publications that employ imagery from advertising and fashion while offering theoretical discussions of abstract concepts related to freelance labor,

individual identity, and the viability of community building under capitalism. The group's distinctive texts meld the flippant tone of gossip magazines, the personal insights of *Cosmopolitan*, and the sweeping scope of critical theory tomes. K-HOLE is best known for coining the term "normcore," which describes a deliberately unflattering, unsexy approach to fashion. The group argued, counterintuitively, that by adopting a generic style, individuals could achieve true agency, pursuing whatever they desired by continuously blending in with different subcultural groups.

Even when staking out an ambiguous position on consumerist culture, one that eschews hardline critique while nonetheless revealing the absurdities of corporate rhetoric, K-HOLE cultivated a relatable perspective that wouldn't be out of place in more mainstream marketing materials. Their PDFs are easy reading, and many offer gossipy insights into the group's working dynamics, which involved constant self-examination and criticism. By contrast, Yago's solo work—often cryptic, reticent, and opaque—reveals much less and alludes only faintly to the conditions of its production. Though it disbanded last year, K-HOLE remains a relevant touchstone for understanding her project, which can be read, at least in part, as exploring the tensions between the need for individual fulfillment and obligations to collectives, be they communities of artists or corporations.

In a 2013 interview with curator Isla Leaver-Yap, Yago described her experience working at a law firm as a tech consultant, installing software and training employees to use it.¹ This job informed her 2011 exhibition "Esprit," at Tomorrow Gallery in Toronto. The show comprised images of almonds, apples, lemons, sushi, fish oil capsules, a watch, and a bottle of green tea—snacks and other articles that office workers might have around their desks. Rather than photograph these items, Yago placed each on a scanner. The resulting series alludes to the kind

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DOG

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of self-care regimen followed by workers attempting to maintain a healthy lifestyle while putting in long hours. The nutritious foods and wellness supplements appear in high-resolution, every surface detail rendered with precision. Yet they look lifeless and fake in the scanner's stark, clinical light.

In the interview with Leaver-Yap, Yago described her intention to examine (scrutinize, really) how certain products fit into an ideology of self-care. She ultimately found herself doubting not the efficacy of care but the coherence of "self." Though none of the objects in "Esprit" carry conspicuous logos, Yago connected the images she produced to the kind of brand consulting work she did with K-HOLE: "When ascribing subjectivity to a brand or product, you begin to empathize with it. By defining its identity, you end up privileging that object on the same level as yourself. This can throw your own sense of self into a tailspin."² In this way, we might regard the highly detailed images as a kind of portraiture, elevating the depicted objects to a level of quasi-subjectivity, even as they appear totally flat and artificial.

Animals also exist on this threshold between subject and object in Yago's work. The 2014 exhibition "You and You're People" at Boatos Fine Art in São Paulo featured thirteen photographs taken in a Los Angeles dog park. From each photograph, the title, laser cut in aluminum, hung like a nametag. Yago took these evocative phrases and expressions from the titles of chapters in Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which was famously adapted for German television by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The original 1929 drama follows murderer Franz Biberkopf after his release from prison. His reentry into society coincides with economic depression and the rise of fascism in Weimar Germany. Caught between self-destruction and warring ideologies, Biberkopf enters into a relationship with a prostitute who offers him brief succor, before his criminal colleague shoots her dead.

Yago's *The Sun Warms the Skin, but Burns It Sometimes Too* (2014) focuses on a dog wearing a prong pinch choke chain; a graying, older dog smiles through his muzzle in *About the Eternities Between the Many and the Few* (2014); and *Love Has Its Price* (2014) shows an owner's watchband mimicked by his dog's stud-ded leather collar and shoulder harness.

The leather collars appear like S & M instruments of restraint on these dogs, and by lashing the metallic words to the photographs, Yago plays up such fetishistic associations. Döblin's macabre humor casts the relationship between pet and owner in terms of a gloomy fatalism: food, shelter, and care become synonymous with bondage and domination. In *Knowledge is Power and the Early Bird Catches the Worm* (2014), however, Yago complicates this relationship by underscoring the animalistic side of the human owner. The photo shows the hands of a person sitting at the dog park, eating a hunk of meat out of a Styrofoam container.

Within Yago's practice, certain bonds with and dependencies on human community can also throw the self into a "tailspin." "Heat Island," the title of her 2014 show at Gasconade, Milan,

refers to Urban Heat Islands (UHI), a term that climate scientists use to describe a city where the infrastructure has caused an artificial increase in temperature. Among its many effects, this condition allows nonnative species to thrive in urban zones that in previous generations would have been prohibitively frigid. As Yago states in the exhibition press release: "Fig trees and certain artist communities all thrive in New York City." The show included five photographs depicting fig trees, the pictures affixed to wicker baskets as if they were bed-and-breakfast decorations or Bed Bath & Beyond merchandise. The frames seem to avoid the overt urban/rural contrast evident in *Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?*, though the exhibition's title hints at a similar intent.

If these fig trees are meant to be read as invasive, another series from the same show illustrates an ambivalent attitude about the "artist communities" that also live on the urban heat island of Manhattan. Yago screenprinted canvases with images of human silhouettes and odd confessional texts. *ON SELF RELIANCE* appears at the top of one otherwise untitled canvas, and *CONTINUES, EVERYONE'S AN ISLAND. / NO ONE'S AN ISLAND / I HAVEN'T READ IT, BUT IT FEELS LIKE THE REST OF THE CITY HAS.* It's an embittered and contradictory evocation of John Donne's appeal to human interdependence and Emerson's treatise on individualism, and it seems to end in a deflated acceptance of a go-it-alone attitude.

Yago also writes fragmentary, confessional poems in this same vein, many examining the strange attributes of a lifestyle that combines corporate freelancing with self-directed creative work. Her prose poem "Do You Ever Feel," printed and distributed in a chapbook of commissioned texts and poems that accompanied her 2014 London exhibition, similarly conveys a sense of disenfranchisement among the privileged precariat, educated workers and creatives who nonetheless can't or won't land full-time jobs. In the midst of a claustrophobic cab ride, Yago traces overlapping personal and professional networks, many of them forced into existence by the brutal economics of city life. Relationships are brokered, acquaintances are currency, and the ineffable reassurance of shared intimacy gives way to cold economy—people become exchangeable for one another, valued mostly for their social or professional status. When she arrives at her destination, Wall Street, Yago realizes her inescapable situation, hopelessly greeted by a statue of Cerberus, the guard dog at the gates of hell.

WHAT ARE THE politics of Yago's lament? In some cases, she can be painfully direct. For her 2014 show at Cubitt, she invited the animal rights organization London Wildlife Protection to participate, allowing them to distribute materials and raise awareness of their cause. The advocacy group's altruism is difficult to reconcile with Yago's work, considering how the ducks in her photographs are heavily mediated, symbols of the natural world that facilitate enigmatic ruminations by participants in the highly artificial art world.

For her 2014 exhibition "Distaff" at Eli Ping Frances Perkins, New York, Yago included flyers produced by the ASPCA protesting horse-drawn carriages in the city. The show featured a series of



This page, two photos from the series "Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?," 2012-14, eight prints mounted on metal grates, 27 1/2 by 39 1/2 inches each. Courtesy: Cabarrus, London.



View of Dena Yago's exhibition "In Escrow," showing *PITI*, 2016, colored chalk on wall. Courtesy High Art, Paris.



rugs strung throughout the gallery, some hanging from chains. The charity's intervention suggested a comparison of these textile sculptures to a stable of abused horses. The title of the exhibition suggested an equally important conceptual reference. A distaff is both part of a loom and the name for female lineage. The press material explained that Yago commissioned the rugs from Bulgarian women who work with an intricate traditional process. The equation of these women's work and animal labor is uncomfortable, to say the least. It may be a provocative extension of Yago's "object-oriented" position. Still, it is difficult to believe that the well-meaning advocacy group or the weavers consented to facilitate this point, though there is a kernel of empathy in Yago's attempt to connect networks for animal and human welfare.

While her aesthetic means may vary widely, a melancholic anti-humanism encroaches on Yago's irresolvable politics. "In Escrow," her 2015 exhibition with High Art, Paris, included a wall drawing representing a scene from Disney's 1951 cartoon *Alice in Wonderland*. In the film, the perennially late March Hare orders Alice to help him find his gloves. While searching the house, Alice uncovers some inviting cookies, eats one, and grows exponentially in size. Her arms and legs protrude from the windows and doors, and her face peeks out from a pair of pink shutters. The rabbit yells, "Help! Monster!" and runs away, gripping his pocketwatch. Yago's version of the cartoon drama, *PITI* (2016), is a chalk wall drawing that contains some apocryphal details: three marijuana leaves with legs and baggy eyes march toward the foreground, the hare looks at his clock with bloodshot eyes, and the Mad Hatter peers luridly at the house's backside with an unlit joint in his mouth. Alice's torso and butt are encased in the house, and her face appears quite worried, while an orange flower stares at her, enrapt.

Stylistically, the psychedelic mural is unique in Yago's practice. But its merger of Alice's body with the house provides a relatively

direct summation of her interest in flattening any hierarchy between humans and objects. *PITI* is based on a mural that decorated a former marijuana dispensary, which, after it was closed for being too near a school, Yago was able to rent as an affordable studio. As the press release outlines, *PITI* is an acronym for principal, interest, taxes, and insurance. In real estate terms, it represents the buyer's total monthly payment. It's also, of course, a pun on the infantilizing sentiment "pity." As the title of the wall drawing, the acronym connects the sexualized parts of Alice's body that are visible—"ass, breast, legs or hips," as specified in the press release—to the language of asset management and real estate calculations. A series of photographs included in the same show offers fragmented views of a female dancer. Shot from disorienting perspectives, some of these images appear to have been taken by the dancer herself. If the sexualized Alice of the mural has been placed on display, the photographs allude to a culture of online self-presentation, facilitated by Instagram, wherein a user can potentially monetize her body through carefully composed selfies that attract large followings.

Underneath these layers of appropriated imagery and references to zoning laws and financial transactions, Yago's work remains connected to her own experience. The chalk mural serves as a kind of emblem for economic processes in which she, as an artist-tenant, is implicated in ideological positions that slur together objects and human bodies. Even when she employs vernacular aesthetics (like the mural) and craft techniques (like the Bulgarian rugs), or depicts pastoral worlds, Yago never seems to be reaching for an outside or an elsewhere, a zone of escape from a world of anxious freelancers, on-call creatives, and branded lifestyles. ○

1. Isla Leaver-Yap, "Life on a Heat Island: Dena Yago," Dec. 12, 2013, leaveryap.wordpress.com.

2. *Ibid.*



ESPRIT (Green Tea), 2011, C-print on aluminum, 20 by 16 inches. Courtesy Tomorrow Gallery, Toronto.