

The Exploits of the Incomparable Shamila at the UCA Gallery

In *The Exploits of the Incomparable Shamila*, showing from 1 April through 2 May, Christopher Slack confronts media chicanery. In 2001, Slack began producing work informed by the “War on Terror” media epidemic that ensued after the 9/11 attack. Shamila's character emerged from the maelstrom.

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Shamila, the incomparable: the feminine reincarnation of the Chechan militant Islamist, Emir Abdallah Shar Abu-Idris, who fought - and paid with his life and the lives of hundreds of civilians - for Russia's withdrawal from Chechnya. Without knowing any more about her, Shamila is already set up for hot political controversies. Take “hot” as the next cue: make Shamila a burkha-and-bikini-clad supermodel posing provocatively with a machine-gun, and you have the first statement in an inevitably heated debate.

Slack typically draws on a multitude of art historical influences resulting in work that is (over)loaded with oft contradictory meanings. Here, he has appropriated mass advertising's mode of depiction, placing Shamila in poses common in glossy magazines and billboards advertising this season's hottest trend. His colour is saturated and high-gloss, his rendition precise. Despite his typically multi-referential representation, there are two prevailing notions in this body of work:

War and Sex.

The mythical demigoddess becomes a vehicle for Slack's hard-hitting, double-edged outcry against the media's knack of twisting violence into an acceptable, if not always pretty, picture by wrapping a war package up with a luscious sex ribbon. As much as Shamila is powerful as a beautiful gun-bearing icon, she is robbed of her power by deification. She may be holding an RPG, but she is fixed by the public's gaze, cast within a stereotype no amount of firepower could crack and rendered innocuous. Slack draws attention to the public's very similar position - hypnotised by the media's supermodel, blind to the armoured vehicle she waves from as an ethical minefield is laid.

The exhibition contains enamel-on-board paintings and a number of woodcuts and screenprints, that together show the contentious arc of Shamila's development. Christopher Slack will also feature in a dedicated article in one small seed's March-April-May issue, which will be available at the exhibition opening.

Gallery spokesperson: Jacqueline Nurse

