

# The Fashion for Modesty

Artist **Margarita Gluzberg** talks to curator **Clare Carolin** about bobs, blackouts, the topology of desire in her recent work and its connection to austerity and excess



Margarita Gluzberg,  
Hairstyles for the  
Great Depression 1,  
graphite on paper,  
2009 ©the artist,  
photo Thierry Bal



Margarita Gluzberg, *In the Blackout*, 2008, oil on linen, courtesy Paradise Row ©the artist

**Clare Carolin:** Let's start by talking about *In the Blackout*, based on a photograph you took of a trading floor. It's painted more schematically than much of your other work. Why is that?

**Margarita Gluzberg:** I painted *In the Blackout* in May 2008 and at that time I was interested in the fictional nature of the financial world, its cartoon-like, skin-like surface, which is reflected in the structure of the picture. The image is overlaid with forget-me-nots, which represent things disintegrating, becoming a memory of the past. I felt like somehow I made a prediction of the meltdown.

**CC:** Are you saying that the fictional nature of the financial market was reflected in its surface appearance?

**MG:** Most trading floors – like the one in this painting – are electronic. They're constructed of walls of computer screens that create a kind of virtual space. Even though it's occupied by physical people gathering information and making

transactions, this huge abstract universe of financial data is concealed behind the screens. My guide told me that the traders were becoming more and more excessive with the numbers of screens around their desks. They didn't really need so many, but they were status symbols and having a lot of them had become a kind of fashion.

**CC:** The series of hair drawings that you began in the late 1990s and have recently revived also deal with information accumulation and inaccessibility.

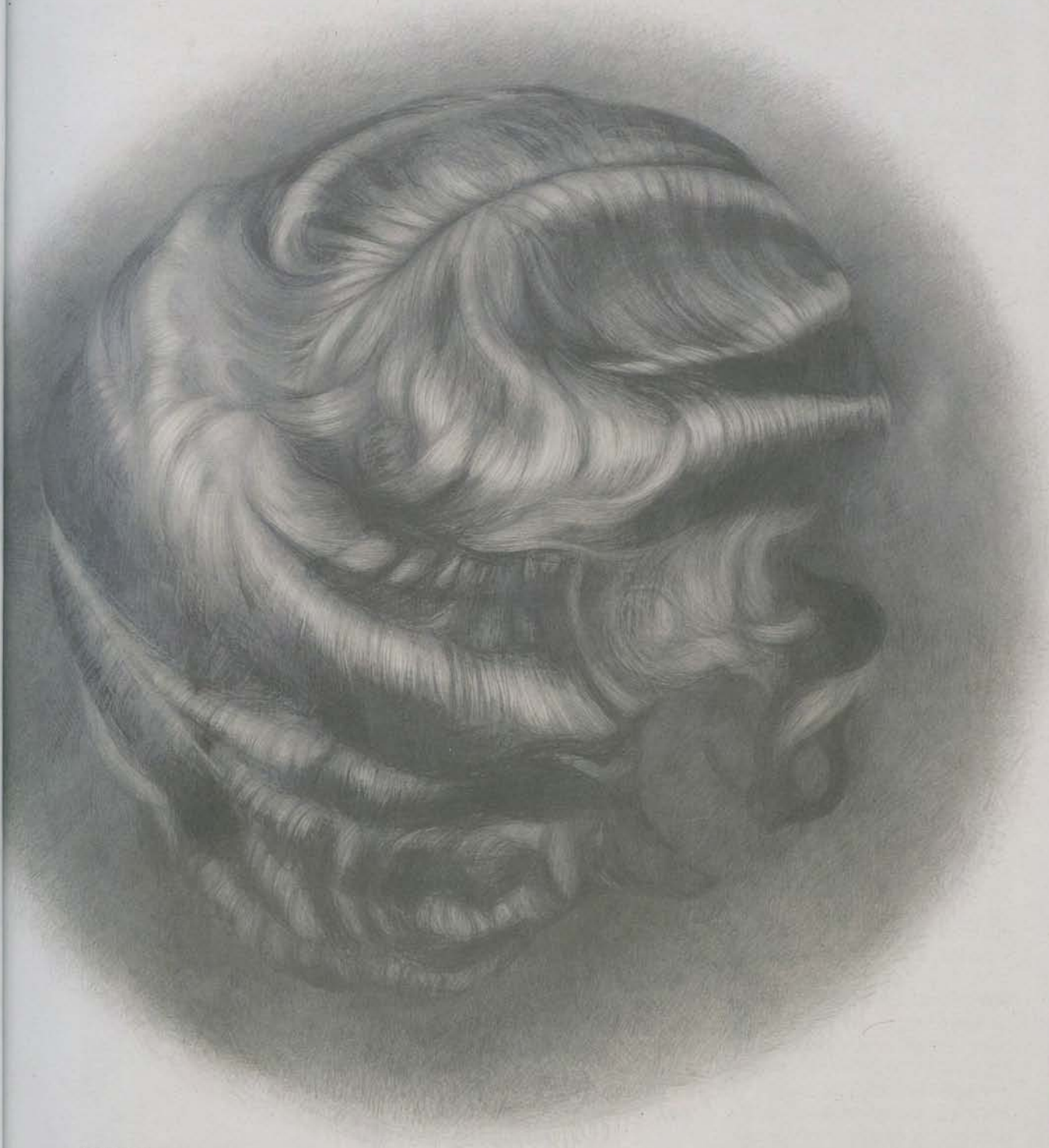
**MG:** Yes. Although with the hair drawings I am actually accumulating information as concrete matter as I draw. I've always seen this as an architectural proposition, that the drawings are physical constructions, not just illusions. A lot of my work has a voyeuristic element, a sense of someone gazing at the surface of a space that they can't access, which connects with the feeling that as a consumer

you are always desiring something you can't quite reach. One of the reasons I draw backs of heads and luscious hair is that you can never really access the brain inside.

**CC:** So is there an analogy between the brain and the stock market?

**MG:** To some extent they're both nervous systems. Even though these two works manifest in very different ways there's a common topological approach; an interest in one thing becoming another, taking on different forms. Hair as line, as accumulation of information that then becomes a container for the head, can be seen in the same way that maybe the computer or the wall of computer screens becomes a container for the fictional information accumulation of the financial world. And the two are linked through this idea of fashion...

**CC:** The link between finance and fashion is articulated very specifically in the title of your



Margarita  
Gluzberg,  
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current series of hair drawings: *Hairstyles for the Great Depression*.

**MG:** I've always been fascinated by hair as matter, as an excessive accumulation of lines, but the general trajectory of my work has been very much about commodity and consumption and how history is reflected through fashion-surface. I thought of the bob as a symbol for the 1930s and the 'Great Depression', and since this phrase kept appearing a lot recently I came up with that title as a kind of matter/metaphor for this period.

**CC:** Do you actually style the hair as you draw?

**MG:** The styles are faithful to archive images from the 1930s but I invent forms a little bit; they are constructions rather than images, sculptures rather than representations, they are a presentation of materials, and the materials are lines. I never start from right to left, or left to right, or top to bottom, it's actually a layering process so I am literally building and growing and accumulating information as I draw.

**CC:** Would you say that these hairstyles resonate with current fashions, as well as the current state of the financial markets?

**MG:** I look at contemporary culture and fashion all the time and one of things that I really notice at the moment is that everyone has a bob. There's a sinister irony that now that we have been in recession, on the edge of a depression, the 1930s are really fashionable as vintage culture.

**CC:** It's the opposite of big hair; a modest style for a modest time.

**MG:** In relation to the issue of modesty I have always really liked this short story by F Scott Fitzgerald called *Bernice Bobs her Hair*. It's about a dowdy girl going to stay with a rich fashionable cousin who teaches her the techniques of flirtation. She turns out to be such a good flirt that she actually flirts with the boy her cousin is after. To spite her, the cousin gets the

dowdy girl to bob her hair and everyone is really embarrassed because the bob is still the symbol of the flapper and freedom and liberation...

**CC:** The immodest woman...

**MG:** Yes. It's still not the thing to do. So as Bernice leaves the house at night she cuts off the 'It' girl's hair. The bob is constantly present in F. Scott Fitzgerald's work from the 1920s as a sign of daring and breaking with convention, then in the 1930s it becomes the convention; everyone has a utilitarian bob because they can't afford to do anything with their hair.

**CC:** Let's get back to the fashions of early twenty-first-century London? *Christmas Bollocks* is a painting based on photographs you took of Harrods and Bond Street around Christmas 2007.

**MG:** Maybe there was something in the air then... like the last days of consumerism. I've always been interested in economic collapse and excess, which maybe has something to do with having grown up in Soviet Russia, but I wanted to make these paintings that were almost like maps or traces of something that was about to disappear. At the time I was looking at shopping arcades and malls, especially those in the north of England, the big arcades of Leeds that were built at the height of the industrial revolution and symbolise the rise of consumption, commodity and trade; a version of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. I was thinking about the idea of the English as a nation of shopkeepers and how shopping for Britain is a recreation, a hobby. This proliferation of shopping arcades and malls and shopping centres is something that becomes very interesting historically. In Moscow GUMM was a famous department store that became State-owned and is now again a luxury arcade with Western brands. All these things came together for me as a point which I tried to represent in *The Money Plot* show at Paradise Row in May 2008,

where I built a structure reminiscent of a 1930s trade stand which housed an archive that related to GUMM and the northern markets, and I also tried to make images that would be moments of that enquiry. *Christmas Bollocks* is a moment in that it is just one evening of me walking through Christmas London and looking at Harrods and Bond Street and all these glistening lights and decorations that represent old London – a fiction...

**CC:** Did you want to convey a feeling of exclusion from this exclusive fictional world of hyper-expensive luxury?

**MG:** I'm not sure that I'm excluded, it's more that I'm moving through the city with this surface reality of light that is concealing the presence, or the absence of something. I've always been intrigued by the way architecture functions at night – that buildings become something else through the way they are lit.

**CC:** The dotted lights on the façade of Harrods articulate the structure of the building whereas in a modernist building



this would be reversed; light would fill the voids.

**MG:** I'm interested in the nature of disappearance... that shift that occurs when something starts receding. Certainly in the arcades in Bradford some kind of idealised world of commerce has vanished. I was strangely affected by this melancholy of the great industrial buildings of the north, their lost grandeur, how they represent something that no longer exists.

**CC:** What you're describing are the results of a gradual process of demise. But over the last ten years we've become accustomed to things changing with such frequency; buildings, fashions coming and going, appearing and disappearing so fast its distracting, even nauseating. Now we've seen signs of the built environment going into stasis, it's interesting to think about what other kinds of transformations will take place...

**MG:** People say that minimalism is a sign of an economic boom because you can't do it with cheap materials, whereas vintage and excess, and more baroque things signify economic downturn because you can play around with bits of old gold crap. Will riches become embarrassing?... It already seems very out of date to display affluence and I don't know how this culture of the shop front, the display which is all about excess, will adjust to a fashion for a kind of modesty because until now hyper-drive capitalism has been moving, moving, moving towards constant, conspicuous consumption, and the creation of fictions. It will be curious to see how this fake non-consumption gets absorbed into the culture, whether it just becomes another kind of hypocrisy.

**CC:** And to consider that in terms of the lost pretensions of the spaces of consumption that you've just been talking about: The Northern markets and GUMM.

**MG:** The most unbelievable place I've seen recently was in Moscow; a place I used to



go with my parents when I was a child called VDNH, a huge Stalinist exhibition complex full of these amazing buildings dedicated to the celebration of Soviet achievements in agriculture and technology. It's incredibly grand but inside it's now a shabby market. You have all these incredible murals depicting the achievements of the people building a world, in the same way that maybe the nineteenth-century cast-iron shopping arcades show the achievements of production, of capitalism and industry. They are both monuments to powerful utopian visions. In Bradford it's a vision of utopian capitalism, an industry that was about to rise and dominate everything. The Stalinist buildings are visions of Communist achievements but they both end up with nothing more than bootleg DVD stalls in them. It was just tragic seeing this. There is hardly anyone there, and as you walk through this amazing derelict park with all these pavilions which say 'Armenia', or 'Azerbaijan' or 'The Achievements of Space', there's a tannoy announcement with a voice saying: 'In pavilion number 78 there is a sale of Italian handbags'. It's surreal. The place has become the cemetery for a dream.

**CC:** An immodest cemetery for an immodest dream....

**MG:** Well Stalin was an immodest kind of guy... the architecture is based on the

Greco-Roman models but the excess has been replaced by commerce in the most tragic way. It's monumental architecture gone to seed. Like the arcades, they're both monumental desire spaces that have become relics.

**CC:** Which connects back to the forget-me-nots and the trading floor.

**MG:** The forget-me-nots are a warning. What I've been painting are relics of the past or predictions of the fall of an excessive culture, the culture of display. The notion of display in itself isn't a modest proposal because to display something is to elevate it to a status that might be higher than it really is. I mean the idea of the monumental building or the arcade, a palatial structure that basically just sells 'stuff', is ostentatious. I wonder what will happen now... yet consumption has become so complex that modesty no longer necessarily stands in opposition, it's simply another marketing device. Asceticism sells.

*Margarita Gluzberg is an artist based in London. Clare Carolin is a freelance curator and writer based in London and is Deputy Head of Department of the Curating Contemporary Art MA Course at the Royal College of Art.*

*This interview took place in late Spring 2009.*

*left Margarita Gluzberg, Christmas Bollocks, 2008, oil on linen, courtesy Paradise Row @the artist above Margarita Gluzberg, VDNH, 2009 @the artist*