



Francine Spiegel lives upstate with artist Takeshi Murata in an octagon-shaped cinderblock house. This conversation begins in Spiegel's studio on the property, where she is showing me a black Amish bonnet that she has draped pink ribbons over. We flip through a few spreads from an Italian *Vogue* back issue in which Amish bonnets accessorized tight, floor-length dresses and Catwoman-ish, patent leather, black boots. Fran is planning a late-summer messy performance at Deitch Projects, in which others and myself will have stuff thrown, smeared, caked, and squirted onto us. As a test, Fran has just enacted her first messy photo shoot in the forested backyard. We're looking at the pictures and brainstorming.

FRAN: I was looking for certain stylistic combinations.

TRINIE: This is fashion that eroticizes covering the body. I always associate that with Middle Eastern repression or

Hassidic Jewish mothers. Frumpy long skirts. I used to wonder if covering was sexy because of the mystery. The idea of ownership, or that only one person gets access.

FRAN: Those women aren't sexy to me because all I see is arranged marriage. I think the dress code is pretty strict.

TRINIE: That's the problem with separating the look from its politics. We take for granted that we can pull images from wherever. But you have to consider what the imagery represents.

FRAN: I know. I just hope I'm doing a good job taking it out of context. People always want to talk about fetish with me. When they only get the fetish part, I'm like, *No, I don't even care about that.*

TRINIE: I'd guess messy fetish is rooted in degradation?

FRAN: Lately, studying latex materials has led me to dominatrix and submission stuff. Latex is so awesome . . .

TRINIE: It's so laden with symbolism.

FRAN: That one is hard. I really want to use latex as a fabric, to take sissy dresses and their submissive thing and translate them through latex, to make them more powerful. But with any restrictive material, there's way too much association with bondage.

TRINIE: It's worth trying latex, because if you re-work it hard enough maybe you can create a new set of symbols that disassociate your work from bondage.

FRAN: All fetishes must have something to do with S/M, I suppose.

TRINIE: There's the do-er and the accept-er, regardless of material, which is just based on erotic taste. With cinema, there's the camera versus the viewer. Fetish is linked to the image, right, knowing that someone took the picture whether it's still or moving? That relationship is such a set-up.

FRAN: It's funny to get into this topic, since I have no sexual feelings toward these images. But people say everything in life is tied to sexuality.

TRINIE: I don't even think I believe that everything is tied to sexuality. That sounds like a masculine concept to me.

FRAN: Especially to women, people say, *No, it is tied to sexuality, you're just confused*. If you see a woman [in art], it must be about sex.

TRINIE: But visual art is good language to investigate sexuality, since there's the built-in viewer/voyeur factor. Cinema, too. The gaze. Actually, I like looking at art about sexual issues more than reading about it. Sex scenes in books can be super nerdy.

FRAN: I think I see myself in those messy pictures. My paintings are self-portraits in a way. There must be some sexual confusion in there somewhere. I keep returning to the same imagery like ruffled costumes, zombies, western backdrops, topless women who are crying. I'm sure it all relates. It's a lot to keep track of, I've stopped trying to make sense of it. I like what the fetishes are trying, but I wonder how much of the sex is in my own stuff. I might have to answer for this messy performance because I feel closer to fetish-generated imagery, and the cinematic, than I do to the Actionists. I like Fluxus, though. I just hope the messy performance will be a big push to the next thing and also help define how my paintings function, too. But now I'm questioning why I want to do this live to women?

TRINIE: Only women?

FRAN: I think so. It's an instant mask. I've been looking at the amateur photos for so long, and even though I thought I'd grow tired of the idea by now, I'm still inspired by what mess can do. Joy, sadness, fear, it can show a wide range of emotion. But when it comes down to actually throwing a pie in someone's face, I wonder if I'll find out about the destructive part of this? It's a scary thought. That's another reason why I tried it on myself first.

TRINIE: Those photos are such a fantasy construct. When you look at an image over and over, you form your own ideas of what's going on in it. When it happens in real life the fantasy will be rearranged.

FRAN: Yeah, then you're like, *Oh god, this is why I'm into it!* But it wasn't destructive, for me at least.

TRINIE: I think it's brave that you tried it yourself first. I bet you immediately sensed if you liked it or if you never wanted to do it again.

FRAN: I would, I felt like cool things happened. It was sort of like a meditation. Takeshi and my friend Ben

threw pies and dumped buckets of goop that I made that morning. Gender didn't matter because they were helping me generate artwork. Kind of convinced me that male/female doesn't matter at all. But I think men would have different reactions to getting pied. I feel like they'd pick fights. My test was good, but quiet. Messy chaos might be great. It's difficult to decide. I wouldn't want anyone to hold back.

TRINIE: Performing for you will be easy for me because there's a greater goal. There's an artistic value.

FRAN: Thanks! I am asking people to go through a lot. The dream is that they're all my friends and that we'll emerge as new women. Maybe it will be weird bonding experience. I'm not sure describing it in this way sounds like good art though; sounds more like messy *Sex and the City*.

TRINIE: In performance, you release feelings of embarrassment, self-consciousness, but then it's also about group bonding. It's collaborative. You either must be comfortable around your partners or think they're genius so it's worth putting up with difficult personalities.

FRAN: That's good to hear. It'll be liberating to have friends around. Either way, I am planning to self-destruct.

TRINIE: Is the goal to generate your own imagery for your paintings?

FRAN: So far the goal seems larger than possible, since I'd love to make a movie with handmade sets and special effects. But I'm also excited by photos that capture split second moments as the stuff getting chucked is airborne. Definitely I'll incorporate it into my paintings. I looked at my test photos. I'm paying more attention to how the fluids sparkle and shine. It will be a nice element to exaggerate with paint. But as photographs alone, I can't tell how this test run is working. Photography is an entirely different and new medium for me, so I don't know.

TRINIE: Do you usually pull images off the Web, then combine and change?

FRAN: They're collected and collaged. The paintings are more specific and rendered. When I was doing more freeform collages, they were made of everything, paint bits, printouts, debris from my studio floor. But this changed when I made *Zombeyoncé*. It became all about

the figure. I was getting tired of the work actually looking like trash.

TRINIE: Was the trash too recognizable?

FRAN: I liked the mess, but it started to look like a mess.

TRINIE: That's when you employed the stretched canvas convention?

FRAN: Yeah. *Zombeyoncé* was a big collage, but one figure rose out of the pile. It was about her. The trash went from the floor to her body and made everything more attractive. Then I made the mural [in the living room], and I started the new painting method.

TRINIE: That was right after you moved to the country?

FRAN: Yeah. In LA, Takeshi and I were really dedicated to watching zombie movies.

TRINIE: And gore stuff, too, like *Street Trash*?

FRAN: Yeah. *Street Trash*'s primordial ooze was made with rainbow-colored paint that foamed up like Alka-Seltzer. Can't improve upon that. I like messy situations when it comes out like the *Three Stooges*, slapstick. Like *Dead Alive*.

TRINIE: I like it when horror is allowed to be funny.

FRAN: *Dead Alive* pushed that idea further than I'd ever seen. Peter Jackson used a record amount of fake blood, something like triple the amount of *The Shining*.

TRINIE: When Matt and I watch horror movies, our humor is pretty skewed. We don't watch as much gore as you, but scenes that completely disgust others can be really great to us. Humor is so specific in horror.

FRAN: I don't like gore movies that don't make me laugh.

TRINIE: They're too disturbing. Laughing is a defense.

FRAN: Horror movies I'm really inspired by push boundaries in a comical way. Like *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats* and *Poultrygeist*. Horror is special because a no-holds-barred approach is fully encouraged and respected.

TRINIE: Right now in my collages, I'm really into making these short, Japanese-style slices. I don't even know what's Japanese about slicing...

FRAN: Woodcuts?

TRINIE: Yes! Build the collage before it's glued down to the page, like paper dolls, with slits for construction. Paper carpentry. The cuts have to do with horror I like to watch. Dario Argento was into knives. Lots of *Giallo* is about the clean-cut. Different surfaces touching, like metal to flesh.

FRAN: John Kleckner curated a group show like that, right? He called it the Italian word for "slit throat."

TRINIE: I guess our collage styles reflect our taste in horror.

FRAN: I want mine to be more clean-cut now. There's too much vomit in mine.

TRINIE: I meant to ask you about your recent color palette change.

FRAN: You noticed!

TRINIE: I don't believe that colors have gender associations, but I've heard that earthy, warm tones are associated with romance, motherhood, menstrual phases.

FRAN: Where did you hear that?

TRINIE: It's a cliché in psychic, new age idealism, goddess worship. I mostly think color concerns mood. You've been using fewer greens, blues, and more reds, browns.

FRAN: Less rainbow maybe. This past winter, I got cabin fever and I was indulging too much in my teenage Goth feelings. It started to affect my painting. You know that Lucio Fulci film, *Four of the Apocalypse*? I became obsessed with the girl in it. Her whiny acting was intense. The movie gave me the creeps, but in a great way.

TRINIE: The idea of having a strong, female heroine in a horror film is a relatively new thing. I have mixed feelings about it. I mean, I make work about rescuing women from that victimized role. But actually, when I watch these new, empowered movies... and in literature this extends into the fairy tale tradition... feminist authors who re-write the classic fairy tales with women winning in the end.

FRAN: Are they interesting?

TRINIE: Well, yeah, only because it's a worthy topic. But they can be corny. Like Angela Carter. Now she feels

a little outdated. I'm glad she wrote those tales and all. Female heroism in horror feels similarly outdated, though I like *Ginger Snaps*, and this new French film, *Inside*.

FRAN: Here is something lately that I can't decide about: the pathetic thing.

TRINIE: My mirror horror essay is about the pathetic, about admitting that I like the old horror movies where the female gets victimized. It doesn't mean I want to degrade women, but I figure by watching them there's some way to reclaim the victimization. I was raised by a mother from the '70s feminist generation who said it is always unacceptable to see a woman in this role. How are you allowed to be fascinated by that pathetic-ness as a woman, without justifying yourself?

FRAN: I'm so glad you're thinking about this, too. I think it's okay to admit that you feel pathetic sometimes. I'd love to feel that I could paint pathetic characters without the male gaze ghost lurking in the corner. The whiny character, being upstate alone and the cabin-fever thing, I wallowed in it to figure out why I wanted to wallow. I watch '70s horror the most, and maybe through digesting so many versions of the sad sack female I feel the need to tell women: *Snap out of it*. But I identify with that character, too. Since I grew up with a single mom, I really admired her strength, but I realized she was unhappy. She was a widow, so her life changes were forced upon her. I get pretty fixated on the powerful-versus-pitiful concept.

TRINIE: Does the '70s preoccupation have to do with slowing down time? Since you live with an animator, do you think about time speeding up and slowing down in terms of the slowness or timelessness of painting? Is that what attracts you to painting?

FRAN: Timelessness?

TRINIE: When you make a painting, you're stepping into a lineage. Some people call your work Pop, but I could compare it to Old Master portraiture.

FRAN: I feel that pressure about painting. But I mainly look at movies. *Sweet Movie* has influenced me more than anything. I'm psyched for people to interpret my work, however. In terms of looking at Pop, I look at *Annie Fanny*, *Heavy Metal*. Horror magazine covers. I started learning about pulp art because of the relationship to Mario Bava and Argento's version of *Giallo*. Aesthetics

of horror. I found a woman who did pastel drawings for *Weird Tales*, named Margaret Brundage.

TRINIE: Did many women do those covers?

FRAN: She's the only one I've found. And when the magazine moved, she couldn't ship her covers since they were pastel. She stopped making them.

TRINIE: She hadn't heard of spray fixative?

FRAN: Pretty classic. Maybe they didn't have hairspray in the '30s.

TRINIE: No Aqua Net? I'm into Ursula LeGuin for the same reason. She was a sci-fi pioneer. She wrote essays about gender bias in the sci-fi world, and decided to have children and a career.

FRAN: I guess back then you had to be revolutionary.

TRINIE: Are your paintings about movement? Are the poses distilled from different angles, or are they invented angles? They seem active, like *Nude Descending a Staircase*. How accurate are the figures?

FRAN: I think they're anatomically correct, but sometimes they're really wrong, and I like that freedom. I've been wanting to make a painting based on animated movement, with faces.

TRINIE: To capture movement on the two-dimensional plane?

FRAN: How did you know that's what I want to do next? I've been pulling screen shots. I took every frame from an *Evil Dead* scene, where a woman is shaking her head.

TRINIE: I like portraying the same situation from different angles in writing. But story convention dictates forward movement with character and plot.

FRAN: Did you try that in a story?

TRINIE: My most recent piece is about going backward in time. I took a character that the fictional "I" meets on the subway and placed him in different situations in "my" past life to see how he fares. Reflecting on the past to make sense of the present...

Can we go back to fetish materials? What about porn and fetish clichés, like the stripper look? The most clichéd fantasy is super shaved. Cosmetic, fake boobs.

FRAN: Howard Stern likes that.

TRINIE: Obviously, that is the opposite of what you're into. Hair isn't even an issue for you, because your forms are totally obscured by other substances.

FRAN: I don't really like bodies!

TRINIE: That's why you cover them with stuff?

FRAN: Yeah.

TRINIE: What about Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection as defined by female bodily fluids? The other root of messy fetish would be the repulsion men feel toward those fluids, right?

FRAN: Women giving birth.

TRINIE: There are five fluids, I think? Blood, urine, pus, excrement, and vomit.

FRAN: And zombie. Corpse.

TRINIE: And necrotic flesh.

FRAN: Did you say vomit? Tears?

TRINIE: Is messy fetish about triggering those substances through texture and color?

FRAN: We've talked about that before. Probably it is.

TRINIE: Paul McCarthy.

FRAN: He's well aware of his substance influence. He was interested in Hollywood and commercialism. You know in *Tommy*, the part when Ann-Margaret gets sprayed?

TRINIE: Yeah.

FRAN: She's watching all the commercials about beans, chocolate, and detergent on TV.

TRINIE: Right. Heinz ketchup.

FRAN: Paul McCarthy is purposeful. And he's more about father-son conditioning. Kristeva is about the mother, since the mother is the first person to teach you that something isn't good or clean. The abject

border. *The Monstrous-Feminine*, on the other hand, is way easier to read than Kristeva. I knew exactly what Barbara Creed was talking about because I'd watched the same films.

TRINIE: For you, it's more about the texture/color combo?

FRAN: Yeah. Well, I love it in a movie, because there are other narratives involved. But when you make a painting bloody and gory, it's harder to get past the violence.

TRINIE: That's why I just re-wrote my witch book. The whole middle section was about the witch eating her girlfriend after she's fooled into thinking she's eating cake. I wanted to talk about cannibalism. But people thought it was too graphic.

FRAN: Even pitted against the cake? If I were eating great cake in my hallucination it would be hard to convince me otherwise.

TRINIE: I think I was just doing it badly.

FRAN: It sounds like a reasonable idea to me.

TRINIE: I'm not writing for shock value. I wanted to talk about the tribal roots of cannibalism, eating a loved one for spiritual reasons.

FRAN: That's horrific!

TRINIE: If you're working with gory subject matter, people don't know how to take it. Is it serious, funny, erotic, or just confusing?

FRAN: I watch as many horror films as I can to get over the shock barrier, so I can make something informed. I don't want to be grossed out by anything anymore. My goal is to push the visual, get a new thing going. I can't think about audience. If you're really into something, but people think it's disgusting, you have to ask yourself why and that might be a bad distraction.

[Holds up an issue of *Splosh*, a British messy fetish mag.] Maybe this is innocent sounding, but to me, this just looks like pie. I like the reality. Like, she wanted it to happen. I'm really particular about what images I like. I don't like it when the women are acting in some sexual way. I like it when they seem genuine.

TRINIE: Showing the pie.

FRAN: Sploshing, that's what they call it in England. It involves only food-like substances and paint, nothing bathroom about it. It's light-hearted that way. I was listening to an interview with John Waters, and he said he brought a messy magazine with him on Jay Leno. It might have been this same magazine.

TRINIE: Oh, right, what about the Egg Lady, Edith?

FRAN: When she's locked in the cage? Which film is that?

TRINIE: When she's in the playpen, begging for eggs?

FRAN: No, the other one. *Female Trouble*, I think. See, that's gross for gross sake.

TRINIE: I know. In *Pink Flamingos*, there are all these intricate relationship dynamics developed, who's in charge and who's the slave. But when Divine eats the dogshit, it erases all the intricacy. That scene is so disgusting!

FRAN: It's intense of him to go through with that for art. I wish I had a clearer opinion on the shocking thing. But I never thought my stuff would shock anyone or that I'd need to explain it.

TRINIE: It's not shocking to me. But I can see how the idea of getting covered in goop could be a shock. Like with pie, it's the externalization of food.

FRAN: It's all a giant metaphor for me.

TRINIE: I like how colorful it is, and how the colors match natural environments. Like one shot of you that's green perfectly matches an algae-filled pond photo Matt [Greene] and I took. So I paired that in the collage.

FRAN: And the brown one matched worms?

TRINIE: That's seaweed! Thick ropes of Northern California kelp. Making those, I was thinking about natural versus artificial, but that broke down fast. You're using real, natural food products. What did you use for your first session?

FRAN: Stuff that was simple and not too damaging, or staining. I liked doing it in the woods, for instant atmosphere. I didn't make many expressions because my eyes got all full of flour. You have to rinse your eyes once in awhile. The brown one was black food coloring, corn-

starch, and water. I thought it was going to look lame, but it's easy and it came out looking good.

The corn syrup looks great because it's shiny and pours on evenly. But chunky drips are nice, too. I'd like to use actual dirt, but as you said, these substances remind you of real things. You don't need the real if you can imitate. Although, it might be nice to stick leaves on and roll around in the dirt a little.

TRINIE: Might as well.

FRAN: I did tests where I was walking out in the woods, but they reminded me too much of *I Spit On Your Grave*. As if I had just gone through something and was trying to get away from it.

TRINIE: Have you ever been to a mud wrestling club? With the rink in the middle? Maybe for your performance you could set up kiddie pools?

FRAN: Oh, I never thought of the arena thing. The idea of a set is great, and I like sitting. If you lay down in it, it's a bit defeating. Probably a wrestling theme is completely defeating all together. Another friend thought of a champagne fountain, with cascading substances. The platform would have multiple tiers and women would sit on each level. The person at the top would get covered first, then it would slowly cover everyone else as it trickled down, mixing and getting muddy. I like the idea that the same substance would reach each person, until it becomes one. I'm not sure the hierarchy is appropriate but the control is nice. In my photo shoot, it was cool to apply things onto myself instead of waiting for them to hit me. I'd like a situation where you could be happy, self-destructive, defeating, the whole range. A chaotic prank scenario would be fun, too, more like a happening. Thinking of it that way is helpful because I realized happenings are unscripted and only last twenty minutes or so. How the happening is recorded is the important thing. ❗