

Aïda Ruilova | *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*

September 7 - October 1, 2017

Fortnight Institute presents, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, a solo exhibition of new work by Aïda Ruilova. Please join us for an opening reception with the artist on *Wednesday, September 6th, 6-8 pm.*

Text by Alissa Bennett

When I was 16, my best friend Pokey and I got after school jobs at a pizza restaurant in the town next to ours. We slacked off and stole petty cash from the register and discussed how one might rob the safe without getting caught, but through some miracle of circumstance, I was eventually made assistant manager. I was as surprised as anyone — the staff was primarily comprised of people in their 20s, and although I cherished my limited power, I also understood my co-workers' resentment. "Did you sweep the floor in the back?" I would ask a pre-med student at the end of every shift. "That floor needs to be swept," and I would imagine all of the terrible things these adults had to say about me in private and I would not give a fuck.

Oh, I was bitchy and I was despotic, but I wasn't really bad in the ways that you think of when a teenage girl comes to mind. By the time I was a junior in high school, I had maybe been drunk a handful of times and was repulsed that Pokey and our friend Vanessa spent their weekends smoking weed and drinking beer in off-season beach rentals with men who were too old to be interested in any of us. The two of them would tell me horror stories about getting stoned with a local creep who they both agreed bore a ghoulish resemblance to the Purple Pie Man, and I would lie in bed haunted by the thought of smoky rooms packed with fishermen who may or may not have the potential to do something sinister to a stoned high school girl. I lectured these two friends of mine, I warned them of all the things I was sure would come with their delinquency, and I secretly congratulated myself for being better than both of them.

One winter night at the pizza restaurant, a married dishwasher whose feelings I'd for some reason always been respectful of asked me for a ride home. "Sure I'll give you a ride home," I told him in a voice that was too loud and too friendly. "I'd be HAPPY TO GIVE YOU A RIDE HOME," and I looked around the kitchen to make sure that everyone saw what a nice person I was after all. When our shift ended, the two of us walked out the back door and got into my second hand Firebird, a tidy sack full of the days deposits clutched in my hand. I can't remember exactly how he led me off course, but we ended up in a parking lot by the beach—I thought he was nice and imagined that if he liked me, it must mean I wasn't quite as terrible as my behavior suggested. At some point not long after we'd arrived, he pulled a glass pipe out of his jacket. "Do you wanna smoke?" he asked, and I didn't think twice about telling him that yes, I definitely did, I absolutely 100% wanted to smoke and I didn't care who knew it.

He lit the pipe and passed it to me and I watched the glass illuminate as I sucked in smoke and held it in my lungs, I watched the red embers flash and then die out when I handed the pipe back to him and stared at him as the whole thing happened again. We talked for a while until my head started to feel like a balloon that was detaching from my body, until the smoke had put me behind glass, way up on a shelf where no one could reach me. I was out of it and uncomfortable and I all at once started to see that this dishwasher and I were not friends and never would be— I saw in a flash that he was a creep, that he was a Purple Pie Man. "I think I need to go home," I told him, and he seemed too nice, too solicitous as he directed me through turns and rotaries that I'd driven over a thousand times before. I felt relieved when he got out of my car and I rolled down my window to yell "See you" at him, even though I hoped I never would again.

What I remember most acutely about this evening is not the physical sensation of pleasure-dread, but the terror I felt when I eventually understood that I'd been driving around in circles for an hour and wasn't sure that I remembered how to get home. I remember looking at intersections and feeling the uncanny horror of going through the same motion again and again but never really getting anywhere. Eventually I felt sane enough to drop the sack of cash in the night deposit slot at the bank and wend my way home.

I don't remember seeing the dishwasher again, though I'm sure that I must have— I do know that we didn't talk about our night at the beach and he never asked me for a ride home again. Though the details of this person have almost totally abandoned me, I can recall with almost perfect clarity how strangely exciting it felt to be so fucking scared, how crazy it felt to watch things become too familiar, like I was listening to my town on a loop. When I finally reached my house that night and got out of the car, I noticed that the temperature had dropped and that the air was cold enough to make my breath come out in giant clouds—it felt normal and sweet to me, and I concentrated on the action as I climbed the steps to my parents' house: breathe in deep, blow out, repeat.