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Meet the Woman Bringing BDSM to the Art World
And a giant neon uterus to Sunset Boulevard.



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Zoë Buckman would like to talk about sex. Specifically, she would like to talk about everything to do with women and sex, from pure pleasure to systemized violence. And she wants to do it in three shades of pink.

"My art should have a lightness and sweetness," says the artist, who has the East London accent of a *Skins* babe. "Especially since it has heavy and triggering subject matters, I prefer to present it in a way that's palatable and draws people in."



A panel from "He Calls This Talk Banter" at the Standard Miami Beach

It's hard *not* to be lured by Buckman's recent work, including a giant neon uterus (wearing boxing gloves!) atop the Standard Hollywood hotel and a series of neon quotes at the Standard's sister property in Miami. Collectively named *He Calls This Talk Banter*, the pieces debuted in early December, quoting everything from overheard conversations to foreplay instructions, and evoking vague sexual experiences that could either be epic or downright dangerous. The piece began as a poem for *The New York Times*, who deemed the snippets (including online tutorial notes from a dominatrix how-to site) to be "too opaque."

Of course, that's partly the point. "People can read a lot of the work as going either way," says Buckman just after her Standard Miami opening. "If there's no ambiguity, if it's only about sexual violence, then there's no room for a real conversation about consent—and the conversations we should be having about sex right now, especially with sexual encounters that

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begin at places [like hotels and parties], is about consent. But what I *don't* want as a consequence of those conversations is for our culture to become more puritanical. I think that lots of people—men and women—are mistakenly turned off from feminism because they think it's not a space that invites eroticism or play, or even inclusion. And that's such a shame. I don't want to be a part of that."



Buckman at the opening of He Calls This Talk Banter

Buckman cites her own experiences with both sexual violence and consensual BDSM—bondage, domination, submission, and masochism—as a source of inspiration. But it was the birth of her daughter, Cleo, in 2011 that sparked her career. "Before her, I wouldn't even call myself an artist," she laughs. "I said I was a 'fine art photographer'—I didn't even have the guts to own it. I was so uncomfortable in that space!"

After over 30 exhibits worldwide and counting, the art scene is officially her space...but there's still work to do. "It's so difficult as a female artist to make actual money, in my experience," she reveals. "Perhaps because you're ELLE.com, I should say that I'm rolling in the dough, because that's what makes people want to buy your shit even more. But sorry! The truth is," she smiles, "I'm still the biggest collector of my work! Because the reality is, the majority of art collectors are still men. That's just a fact. And if they are going to buy work by a female artist, it's unlikely

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to be a work that speaks to rape, abortion, female anatomy—basically, the main focus of my work. And you can ask, 'Why are only men the big collectors?' but obviously, it's because of privilege. So how do we fight that?"

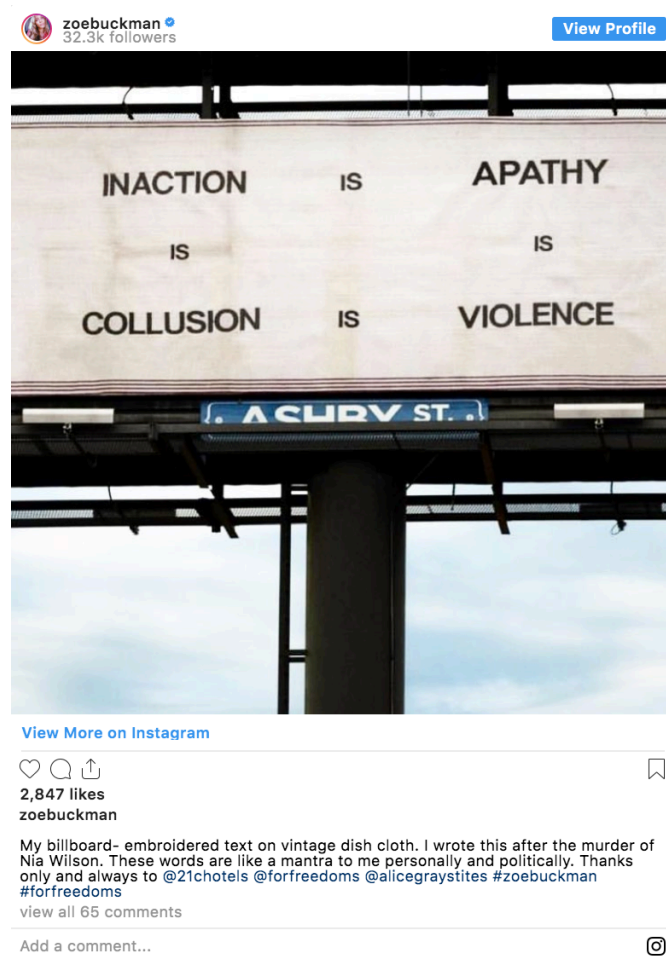


Buckman's giant neon uterus above Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood

Buckman's answer is simple and hard at the same time: Female makers need to demand cash without apology. "Money is the only currency that society recognizes. So recently, I decided to stop doing shit for free," she says. "It sounds so obvious, but to me it's revolutionary. I know plenty of male artists who say, 'Sure, I'll come to speak at your event. I need this much money.' I'm only just learning that I'm allowed to ask for that! From now on, I have to be compensated for things, because exposure is not income."

I ask Buckman the question I deeply want to solve—the same question that makes me deeply hate myself for wondering. How do we deftly weave sexual and romantic ties with men while creating work, and conversation, about rape, abuse, and blanket misogyny?

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"You're right to wonder," Buckman says gently. "I won't lie; that issue is tricky. And yes, it's annoying that we feel like we have to be tempering our experiences to the male ear, because we're worried it'll be scary or off-putting. But of course I've wondered, 'What if he can't handle it? What if he thinks I'm damaged? What if he doesn't want to have sex with me?' And the truth is, only quite recently have I broken through that and been like, 'You know what? This is what happened to me.'

"One thing to remember is that human beings connect through vulnerability. That's our core way of connecting. When a baby cries, your human impulse is to run towards the baby. Our consciousness wants to connect through struggle and even pain. So in a funny sort of way, vulnerability is attractive. It's also a good barometer. It makes me wonder, 'What kind of a man are you? If you're turned off by my experiences, step aside.' Because really, you should be impressed by women. We had shit happen, and we still got up. We still look great. We still *are* great. If you get to be in our lives after all that, you should be honored."

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