

# MARISA NEWMAN PROJECTS



## A Toy Story: Uta Bekaia's My Fragile Little Rabbit

*by Glenn Adamson*

It was exactly a century ago, in 1922, that Margery Williams published her immortal children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It tells the story of a forlorn stuffed animal, which has been overlooked in favor of newer, shinier playthings. The rabbit becomes fixated on the idea that "when a child loves you for a long, long time... then you become real," and eventually sees that dream come true, hopping off into the forest to live happily ever after.

Williams' spare and beautiful book has inspired generations of readers (not to mention the blockbuster *Toy Story* film franchise). Unfortunately though, narratives don't always come so neatly wrapped. In Uta Bekaia's installation, mordantly titled *My Fragile Little Rabbit*, the rest of life comes roaring in. The show is centered on a procession of friendly-faced bunnies, their pelts rather gorgeously decked out in topologies of red and black faux fur. But all is not necessarily well, here in the nursery of the mind. As they make their way across the floor, the rabbits seem to gradually sink into it. One is half-embedded in the wall, trapped. A preponderance of soft, tentacle-like roots hang down like stalactites from the gallery ceiling, and append themselves to Bekaia's leporine protagonists. Watercolors, hung in a tight two-by-three arrangement on one

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wall, depict these proceedings as if documenting them for some future inquiry. And a video, hung low in one corner, whispers:

To my fluffy little rabbit, hiding within.

Always so frightened.

So fragile, so frail, so easy to break.

Thank you for the shelter.

Thank you for the care.

Stay with me...

What are we to make of this scene, evenly balanced between sweet dream and dark nightmare? Clues come in the embroidered emblems that adorn the walls – a striated moon, stars (or are they explosions?), a battle tank. The iconography has a certain universality to it; anyone who’s ever been a child, or still is one, can relate. For Bekaia, it comes from a very particular set of experiences. Born in the country of Georgia, for some years he has divided his time between its capital, Tbilisi, and New York City. His practice, meanwhile, has unfolded across many disciplines, incorporating aspects of fashion, sculpture, performance, and video. He weaves them all into a single fabric, rich with the texture of fable and mythology.

In this newest work, Bekaia has adopted the rabbit as a sort of avatar. It’s a self-representation and self-multiplication (that’s what rabbits do, after all), which speaks to a certain feeling of vulnerability. As a gay man, he has had turbulent times in Tbilisi, sometimes joyful, sometimes harrowing. He has seen the city come alive with liberating energy; in fact, it has a thriving (though underground) queer art scene. Yet it has also been the scene of ugliness, and violence, directed toward the LGBTQ+ community.

It’s all too easy to internalize this hostility, to be made to feel worthless and afraid. This is how oppression works. Hence the rabbit: a creature with few defenses. “Just like little rabbits,” he has written, “we needed to hide and learn to run fast. To survive. Not to get devoured by wolves.” Hence, too, the black tentacles of doubt, which could be alternately construed as attacking from outside, or sprouting from within.

Yet Bekaia’s installation is not without hope, and humor. His works touch a nerve, to be sure, but they also stir the heart. Their hand-craftedness is key to this emotional affect. The artist has put in every stitch in those embroidered faces, lavishing them care. Just the kind of care that a child might devote to a stuffed animal, in the fond hope that it might one day come to life. In a way, that is just what Bekaia has achieved in this exhibition. He has dared to give embodiment to images – and feelings – that most of us would keep buried, way down inside.

They say that everyone has an inner child. Bekaia’s breathes free.

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UTA BEKAIA

My Fragile Little Rabbit

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