



Nell Frizzell

Tuesday 14 July 2015 17.23 BST

## Artist Sarah Maple: 'I've had death threats'

She's smoked in a hijab, worn fetish nappies and menstruated with pride, so self-censorship isn't the first thing you think of when you see Sarah Maple's art. But will getting bricks through her window change that? Nell Frizzell finds out

The last time I spoke to Sarah Maple, her boyfriend was helping her into an adult-sized fetish nappy. This time round, the boyfriend is now her husband and, I discover, he was recently filmed slapping her round the face.

This was for a video in which Maple talks to the camera about her work, then breaks down in tears as she is continually beaten. "It was really weird," says the artist, as we chat over coffee about *You Could Have Done This*, a new book of her work. "I'm actually quite reserved, even though my work is very personal. I was trying so hard not to cry, but all this frustration about politics and feminism was rising up inside me."

It is, I suggest, quite a step from the salad days of adult nappies. "Ha! Yes! I thought that would just be a joke, but I could definitely have defecated in it. My husband says that was the time he found me least attractive."

Maple first came to attention in 2007 after winning Channel 4/Saatchi gallery's New Sensations prize. Back then, it was a pleasure to see a female artist of mixed Islamic background making penis jokes and pro-feminist paintings. "My politics have progressed a lot," she says. "Before, I felt like no one was listening. But now, with big campaigns like No More Page 3 and Everyday Sexism, it feels more acceptable to talk about that stuff. Although there's more hatred as well. Social media has opened me up to a lot more abuse. People seem to take my painting *The Opposite of a Feminist Is an Arsehole* really personally. Someone sent me a photo of an actual arsehole in response. But now I can laugh it off and just block them. I try not to engage."

Self-censorship in the face of public criticism is something Maple plans to explore over the next year, thanks to a £30,000 Sky Arts scholarship she has won. Maple's new project, under the working title *I Don't Agree With What You Say*, looks back to an exhibition she had in 2008 that addressed her cultural background: her father is white British, her mother is an Iranian Muslim, and she went to a Catholic school in Eastbourne. "I always found it difficult culturally knowing where I fit in,"



Artwork by Sarah Maple

says the 30-year-old artist, who lives in Crawley. “I wanted to be a ‘good’ Muslim, but I was an immediate outcast for being mixed. And I felt guilty about that.”

The show included a self-portrait of Maple in a hijab smoking a cigarette and, in another, cuddling a pig. “That’s the one that got the main abuse,” she says, looking suddenly serious. “Someone threw a brick through my window. Then I started getting death threats. I like to think I can say what I want, but perhaps, deep down, it did scare me off addressing those things. It’s a form of silencing.”

Maple’s work doesn’t just attract negative reactions, of course. “The response to *Menstruate With Pride* has been incredibly positive,” she says. This triptych shows Maple in a white dress, surrounded by horrified strangers, giving a single-fist salute as blood spreads across her crotch. “I started my period really young,” she says. “I was about 11 and I felt like I’d disappointed everyone. I kept it a secret from my mum until I was 15. I’m interested in women being shamed for just having functioning parts.”

In another series, Maple is photographed dressed as various Disney princesses doing serious jobs. “Snow White is a scientist,” she says of the shot showing her dressed as the princess, but working on an experiment in a lab. “Sleeping Beauty is performing an operation, Jasmine is a judge, Cinderella has a seat in parliament, Belle is a football manager and Ariel is conducting a business meeting. It’s funny because people call them Disney princesses doing male jobs – they just assume those are male jobs. I never said that. To me, they’re empowering jobs.”

Much of the work in the new book features the artist herself: self-portrait photographs showing her with hairy armpits, paintings of herself in a hijab, or the cock series, in which she’s seen holding various objects – banana, clothes-hanger, hedge trimmer – in front of her crotch. Is it important for her to appear in the work? “I’m moving away from it,” she says, citing her last exhibition, a Shakespearean restaging of *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* called *Keeping Up With the Kapulets*. “It didn’t have a single picture of me in it. But a lot of what I want to communicate, from deep down, is expressed through my face. I can’t explain that feeling to someone else, so it feels natural to use myself. Also, it’s fun to be in the work. I can be a bit vain sometimes, but I try not to Photoshop out the blemishes.”

I wonder if there’s a piece of work that feels like a watershed moment? “*I Wish I Had a Penis*, I suppose. I was at university and we’d go round doing crits, talking about each others’ work. Every time a man got up to speak, we’d be really supportive. But every time a woman spoke, we’d berate her. I realised I was complicit – subconsciously, we’d all taken on that conditioning. It was the first time I realised I might be held back by being a woman. The phrase ‘I wish I had a penis’ just came into my head. So I did that work based on it. When I took it into uni, although all the tutors liked it, everyone else berated me. Then I put it on MySpace and got all these amazing responses. People started sending me their own. That’s the moment I realised that, through humour, I could really communicate something.”

Cocks, hairy armpits, blemishes, periods – is there anything Maple wouldn’t address? Anything she’d be afraid her mum might see? “My mum totally agrees with what I’m saying, but just hates the way I’m saying it,” she says. “She’s quite religious. She’s fasting at the moment. But I want to do something about her, involve her somehow. She’s very reluctant. Maybe I’ll just do it on the sly and tell her later.”

*You Could Have Done This* is published by KochxBos. Details: [kochxbos-store.com](http://kochxbos-store.com)