

Images: *A drowning Sim's cry for help*, by Ursula Larin, 2020.  
Photos by: Dean Swindell



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# A DROWNING SIM'S CRY FOR HELP

By Ursula Larin

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## A DROWNING SIM'S CRY FOR HELP: Ursula Larin

A *drowning Sim's cry for help* might at first glance seem light and cheerful, and in some moments, it is. However, look a little closer at the cartoon-like, shiny, slick forms mostly produced at a distorted scale, and you'll find they stem primarily from uncomfortable and painful memories and inclinations. They are then re-imagined, dressed up, poked fun at, and camouflaged in ambiguity, becoming not only palatable but luscious sound bites; together giving the viewer a window into the workings of Ursula's mind. Cloaked in the disguise of gaming-related content, Ursula borrows imagery from the genre of online gaming, YouTube culture, and DIY, to present a series of cringe-worthy propositions that reflect on human experience, and existence. These objects and subsequent metaphors are visually relatable, and also personal reflections of Ursula's experience with uncomfortable and confusing moments, processed and wrapped up in playful negotiations of found objects, cheap materials and lolly-like colours.

Ursula is a child of the internet. Ask her about the works in the show, and she'll send you YouTube links, and memes, admitting that she's more a netizen, than a gamer. Interestingly, the 'game' that sets the scene for the exhibition, *The Sims*, is often defined as a virtual world, rather than a game platform. Since early 2000, users have built their ideal lives in the game platform, which is now in its fourth iteration. In most cases, gaming provides the player with a total escape from reality. *The Sims*, however, offers an alternate reality, providing the stage on which the user has the opportunity to do life better or, at least, differently. The platform presents a simulation of the real world, where "players control the narratives of their Sims in ways that they may not be able to control in their own life narratives."<sup>[i]</sup> The game's structures and rules simulate (Western, heteronormative, suburban, family) life, relationships, and community dynamics. Since the game's first release in 2001, players have found ways to inhabit the virtual world(s) differently, exploiting glitches and pushing the game in directions where the developer had not intended initially.

The exhibition's title, *A drowning Sim's cry for help*, nods to the dark undertones in ways that the work initially holds out. A framing tool for the objects installed, the wicked sense of humour behind each of these works shines through. Referencing the 2004 version *The Sims 2*, the title nods to the hack in which drowning Sims became common pastime by those in the know, and so inclined. The act is easy: all the player needs to do to rid their world of a tiresome Sim, is coax them into the pool, remove the ladder, and then ignore their panicked cries for help and watch their demise<sup>[ii]</sup>.



Humour is subjective and contextual; it is also important. Having a sense of one (or not) can define how we navigate our time in this world. The stories we tell ourselves about our experience matter. Research into the role of humour in dealing with loss and trauma shows that treating our internal narrative with a dose of humour can help us deal with difficulty. Ursula Larin may have a murky history to mine, but when it comes to a sense of humour, she has one in bucket loads (dark as it may be). And in the world where a drowning Sim cries out for help, Ursula is God.

By Courtney Coombs

[i] Nutt, D., and Railton, D. 2003. 'The Sims: Real Life as Genre'. *Information, Communication & Society*. 6:4, 577-592.

[ii] Find a comprehensive list of how to kill Sims here: [www.lifewire.com/killing-a-sim-837386](http://www.lifewire.com/killing-a-sim-837386)

[iii] Boerner, M., Joseph, S. & Murphy, D. 2017. 'The Association Between Sense of Humor and Trauma-Related Mental Health Outcomes: Two Exploratory Studies'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*. 22:5, 440-452.