



SOPHIE TOULOUSE

UTOPIAN IDEALS GET A WARPED 21ST-CENTURY MAKEOVER IN THE NATION OF ANGELA

Perhaps nothing is more satisfying than the construction of one's own mythological universe. For time immemorial, writers and artists have both mirrored and commented upon our society via the construction of strange alternate realities – a methodology shared by literary works as disparate as *Dante's Inferno*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Brave New World*. The French artist Sophie Toulouse's *Nation of Angela* is one such surrealist trip into the outer reaches of the artistic imagination, and her warped, psychedelic utopia – presided over by the seemingly benevolent dictatorship of the mysterious Angela – provides a humorous and deeply political metaphor for the advertising-saturated artifice of reality with which we are constantly bombarded. We are speaking of course of the consumer culture that seeks to dictate everything from what brand of footwear you wear to what side of the political fence you are on, or, as the NOA so cleverly points out, what side you might think you are on – to quote one of the NOA's many slogans...

You're mine before you know who I am. I win before you know we are fighting.

"The NOA was originally conceived to push the paradox to its paroxysm," explains Toulouse. "It's both completely anarchic and fascistic, tolerant and intolerant. Although it has a distance from today's reality, it acknowledges the fact that there's not much you can do about these things any more, except maybe flee. But you'd have to flee en masse for that to actually work."

Full of surreal drug-fuelled battles between waif-thin catwalk models high on crystal meth, ecstasy and diet pills, and the super-sized troops of The Army of Fat Elvis, the NOA

provides a dark and dream-like evocation of some of the most important social issues of our times, such as our enduring and somewhat disturbing obsessions with body image, success and celebrity.

"The Army of Fat Elvis is the incarnation of American consumerism," says Toulouse. "It represents a big disease, a big orgy – the real Elvis ended up fat and drugged-up and he imploded on his throne. His army represents the renegades, the outsiders – the ugly ones pitted against the army of NOA, with their seemingly well-adjusted personalities, perfect bodies and beautiful souls."

The NOA is the latest in the 36 Chambers series of novels that has seen the publisher Drago provide a platform for artists to create radical and uncensored one-off art objects, and Toulouse's offering works on a variety of complex levels. The pages are littered with her beautifully constructed images and, of course, the aforementioned slogans – many of which suggest, none too subtly, that our ideals, morals, and even our identities have somehow been moulded, appropriated and undermined by the monster of consumerism. After all, the benevolent dictatorship of the NOA maintains its power only by duping its citizens into the belief that they are living in paradise. "All of our utopias are dead," says Toulouse. "We are all aware that we are being tricked, but we can't escape that anymore, so we pretend to be okay." Perhaps another of the slogans of the NOA puts it best... *Consume or be consumed.* JOHN-PAUL PRYOR

Nation of Angela is published by Drago Books