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REFLECTIONS ON THE ELECTRIC MIRROR: NEW FEMINIST VIDEO

10/22/09
BROOKLYN MUSEUM
by kirsten swenson



NEW YORK The compact survey "Reflections on the Electric Mirror: New Feminist Video" brings together five artists working individually and two collaborative duos, all of them 30-something women. Despite gender and generational uniformity, these artists could not be more varied in their sexual politics. Still, we are urged to evaluate all their work in relation to feminist art of the 1970s. Borrowing the first part of its title from an essay of that decade by Lynn Hershman, the show also included, when it opened in May, a month-long presentation of such classics as Dara Birnbaum's *Technology Transformation* (1978) and Martha Rosler's

Semiotics of the Kitchen (1975); Judy Chicago's iconic *Dinner Party* (1974-79) resides permanently in the adjacent gallery. In the younger women's videos, it's easy to detect key targets of established feminist critique (the media, futile and repetitive labor) and long-favored gambits (subversive behavior, autobiography). But this cohort distinguishes itself by exploring highly specific identities characteristic of the YouTube generation—post-punk queer urban youth, for instance, or Los Angeles glamazon—which supersede any shared feminist consciousness.

The Swedish-born, Berlin-based Klara Liden makes videos that are difficult to watch and just as difficult to turn away from. In *Bodies of Society* (2006), she tenderly probes and then, like an abusive lover, viciously pummels a bicycle in a bare hallway. *Paralyzed* (2003) documents her performance of a manic, intensely physical ballet in a Stockholm subway car; fellow passengers are at a loss for how to respond. In both, her ecstatic, youthful energy hints at real mayhem, even violence. Understandably, Liden has become a bit of a cult figure. Her brief, DIY videos enact psychological conditions with the same economy of means that propels viral Internet videos.

In *Black Out* (2004), San Francisco artist Cathy Begien dispassionately narrates a lively night out; while she sits blindfolded, her friends support her story by thrusting drinks and cigarettes at her and having their way with her body. The video's comedic tone upends its concern with the loss of identity and control. *Whacker* (2005), an absurdist drama staged by Los Angeles duo Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, finds Kahn, in heels, sunglasses and a sundress, desultorily mowing an overgrown suburban lot with a weed whacker.

Occasionally, she pauses to gaze wistfully into the sunset. Rough and handheld, the video nonetheless has the feel of a Hollywood movie, capturing the self-possessed heroine in long shots as she basks in the sun . . . and whacks weeds. Shannon Plumb, too, draws on Hollywood, using engaging physical comedy to inhabit a range of silver-screen personae. Plumb's black-and-white *Commercials* (2002), in which she clowns her way through a series of product promotions in the manner of Charlie Chaplin, is also an homage to Cindy Sherman. K8 Hardy and Wynne Greenwood's fictional feminist newscast *New Report* (2005) sends mixed messages: the absurdity of the artists' anchors' costumes, set and tagline ("Pregnant with Information") undercuts its serious critique of broadcast news.



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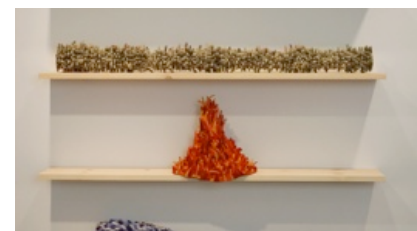
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THE SCENE

DECODING IMAGES



Jennifer Nocon, *Untitled Shelf #4 (Air over Earth over Fire over...)*

Hand-dyed wool, pine #1, teak, 101 x 72 x 14 inches.

Los Angeles-based artist Jennifer Nocon uses the tension created by arranging natural

ALSO

Alistair Frost, *lily pad...lily plant...damn Ive forgotten my ...*

Michael Cline, *That's That*, 2007-2008

The video most grounded in 1970s second-wave feminism is Kate Gilmore's *Blood from a Stone* (2009), which mocks modernism's association with heroic masculinity. Dressed in a prim cardigan and skirt, the artist struggles to hoist 10 solid plaster blocks, dripping with white paint, onto a row of high shelves. As each block—plainly a stand-in for a Minimalist cube—is situated on its shelf, the paint splashes onto the wall and floor, creating a record of Gilmore's labors (and mimicking Abstract Expressionism's painterly splashes). *Blood from a Stone* was performed at the Brooklyn Museum; blocks and paint splotches remain, supplementing the video.

A compelling selection of work, "Reflections on the Electric Mirror" features several artists who have lately gotten considerable attention—Liden was featured last spring in the Museum of Modern Art's "Projects" series, and Begien and Dodge and Kahn were included in the Getty Museum's important 2009 survey "California Video." Lauren Ross, interim curator at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, has identified a range of recent video concerned with the vitiation of identity by commercial media and the Internet. But she leaves open the question of just what comprises feminist video today.

Photos: Kate Gilmore: *Blood from a Stone*, 2009, video, approx. 8 minutes. Right, Cathy Begien: *Black Out*, 2004, video, approx. 5¼ minutes. Both at the Brooklyn Museum.

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