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MIKA

ROTTENBERG

Humorous, absurd, uncomfortable, comic-macabre - are all descriptors of the video and sculptural work of artist Mika Rottenberg (b. 1976, Argentina). Through a globally influenced practice, not pinned to nationality, identity or location, Rottenberg blends fiction and humor to illuminate tangible contemporary concerns. Her visceral curiosity, particularly around the female body, combined with a personal interest in labor processes, influences the production of her video and sculptural installations.

Through architecturally constructed sculpture combined with sensory video experiences, Rottenberg creates immersive scenarios that probe connections between alternate universes and visible reality, calling attention to the tenuous closeness between the real and the absurd. Her works highlight the human body's relationship to capitalist production, often exploring the actual commodification of bodily possessions, and persons themselves. Similarly, Rottenberg's kinetic works operate as constructed mechanisms that allude to other-worldly scenes, providing enticing vitality to otherwise mundane, common materials.

Mika Rottenberg's self-titled solo exhibition at The Bass presents a selection of work created within the past two years, providing a current sampling of the artist's practice along with the opportunity for U.S.-based audiences to see several major works for the first time. Situated within the galleries of the historic museum building, the bicameral layout is merged by two kinetic sculptures, *AC Trio* (2015) and *Ponytail (blond)* (2016), both extending beyond the traditional gallery confines. Their mechanical motions and repetitive sounds provide a precursor to the video and sculptural works within the galleries.

Her sculptural contraptions compliment the complexity of her video installations, captivating the senses and employing auditory elements that arguably center the works. The exteriors of three window air conditioner units clustered together comprise *AC Trio*, a work with obvious relevance to South Florida residents as a predominant fixture on most buildings. Placed here on Miami Beach, the aged exteriors and audible hum suggest a daily, working-class and domestic necessity. Rottenberg creates an artificial ecosystem with the work, where drips of condensation land on heated pots and pans below, suggesting a certain precarity. Her interest in shifting states of matter is evidenced within *AC Trio* as the seductive "hiss" of the water hitting the hot pan signals the transition from liquid to vapor. Through a bizarre and artificial contraption, seemingly endless and pointless in its production, the work perhaps

foregrounds shifting climatic conditions through the context of the installation's location. The appliances specifically intended to mask and alleviate heat are set within the museum's temperature controlled environment, and call attention to the increasingly visible symptoms of global climate change.

Nearby, suggesting a similar respite from an indirect heat, *Ceiling Fan Composition #4* (2016) visually isolates the ubiquitous ceiling fan within colorful windows built into a single wall. As if occupying their own rooms, each fan turns at a different speed to produce a surreal configuration. The work privileges the ceiling – an architectural element that is not often the focal point – causing the viewer to contemplate physical and spatial orientation.



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Mobile installations, *Ponytail (blond)* and *Ponytail (black)* (2016), display disembodied ponytails vigorously flicking up and down on otherwise blank walls. The isolated, distinctly feminine gathering of hair gesticulates for the viewer in an enticing, almost seductive way, although the obvious mechanical sound immediately establishes its artificiality. The use of hair is a recurrent trope in Rottenberg's work, the central element in *Cheese* (2008), a video work inspired by the anecdotal story of seven Victorian sisters' success in the hair growth business, and carried throughout works on view with both ponytails and *Lips (study #3)* (2016). The repetition of hair throughout her practice exemplifies the artist's interest in femininity and the female body's role in the making and sale of commodities.

Rottenberg's *Lips (study #3)* echoes a similar visual to the neighboring *Ponytail (blond)* – a fragmented feminine body part placed on a blank white wall. However, the plump silicone lips are static, and instead invite the viewer to peer inside, and an audio track amplifies as the work is approached. Through *Lips (study #3)*, the suggestive orifice becomes the architecture of the piece and the literal entry point to the work, providing a lens-like view into a kaleidoscopic presentation. A mirrored box reflects a video of similarly fragmented body parts, against a textured and brightly colored wall. The diverse portrayal of races and ethnicities, through feminine lips, hair, tongues and

buttocks, are accompanied by a soundtrack of bodily sounds. The resulting visceral experience calls attention to the production of bodily substances and provokes a simultaneous fascination and aversion to the human body.



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These seemingly discreet works act as primers for Rottenberg's artistic vernacular, which is epitomized within her films. Like the video and sculptural installations that have come to define her practice, Rottenberg displays a keen sense of spatial and design astuteness throughout these smaller kinetic works, and demonstrates and understanding of how architectural elements can serve as stand-ins for gender or signify economic status.¹ The implied architecture and steady, repetitive movements, constructed directly into the museum walls, insinuates a production hidden out of sight (above, below, or behind).

Rottenberg's immersive sculptural video works provide a culminating experience at each wing of the museum. The encounter begins with a portal-like entry room that recreates a visual setting related to the film, transporting the viewer

quite literally through the work, before reaching the film itself. These set-like arrangements bring to life and create a tangible reality of Rottenberg's fictional worlds. Two examples of these works are included in the exhibition and serve as anchors for the multi-sensory experience, *NoNoseKnows (AP)* (2015) and *Cosmic Generator (loaded #2)* (2017). Through staged settings, visitors must negotiate with an initial hesitation of whether to enter the space and ultimately the installations provide hints of what's to follow within the accompanying films. The videos themselves are similarly mysterious and sometimes uncomfortable. One may hope to find resolution and answers behind the other side of the viewing wall, but to no avail as the films revel in unresolved narratives and imaginative, fictional scenarios.

NoNoseKnows (AP) traces parallel stories that take place in China, connected by conveyor belt-like

apparatuses that run through what appears to be a multi-level corporate building. Centered on acts of irritation, *NoNoseKnows (AP)* follows a tall blond woman, whose Pinocchio-esque nose becomes increasingly bulbous and irritated as an allergy inducing mechanism aerates flowers and provokes her to sneeze out plates of noodles.² Swapping back and forth, the work also documents the surgical and meticulous process of manufacturing and cultivating cultured pearls by a group of women in Zhuji, China. Filmed at an operating pearl farm, various locations near Shanghai, as well as sets within the artist's studio, Rottenberg weaves fantasy into reality by incorporating a handle swiftly turned by a young pearl farm worker, which activates the allergen device. The use of the oyster can be interpreted as a euphemism for feminine organs, and again instigates this discourse between labor and production, documenting



something that uses its own resources to produce something that is artificially forced, cultured and harvested to be sold as a commodity.

Rottenberg's early works emerged during the growth of the commercial internet, where the artist utilized the virtual database to cast her video works, finding talents who advertised themselves online and promoting parts of their body for hire. Specifically, Rottenberg is interested in a female cast, who exemplify and offer an exaggerated trait, such as height, size or strength. Her Diane Arbus-like interest in people with unconventional appearances is carried through to the recent film of *NoNoseKnows (AP)*, along with a consistent arrangement of factory type processes that play on the surreal and bodily involvement with labor.

As you watch Rottenberg's films, the absurdity of the scenes and comical oddities are equally contrasted to a type of documentation of real-life scenarios. In her most recent video work, *Cosmic Generator (loaded #2)* is set amongst two real towns on the U.S.-Mexico border, Calexico and Mexicali, as well as a vast plastic-goods market in Xiwu, China. Through a juxtaposition of place, along with a continued injection of humor and sculptural interpretation, the work explores the pronunciation and unevenness of distance. Rottenberg links multiple narratives that gesture at migration and the reimagining of borders through tightly cut shots and transitions through a fictional tunnel between the border of the U.S. and Mexico. A landscape of stalls filled

with the wares of a colorful plastic commodities market is accompanied by the sounds of non-verbal conversations indicated by the 'beep' and trill of each stall-tender's phone message notifications. Like *NoNoseKnows (AP)*, the characters and scenes in *Cosmic Generator (loaded #2)* are linked by mysterious and playful apparatuses. Here, they are not solely interconnected by the movement of products and manufactured commodities, but also through the transition of the characters themselves, passing through tunnels, beyond walls, and through soup-like cosmic substances.

Of the many intertwined storylines within the film, one follows a food cart vendor who comically and suddenly appears in the Mexican desert along the U.S. border, only to arrive at a bustling street alongside the thousands of real commuters that transverse this border daily. By creating amorphous narratives that bridge reality with the inexplicable, and forming situations that one would not typically expect to see, Rottenberg highlights elements of social surrealism, which emphasizes the strangeness of everyday life.³

As suggested by curator and writer Nicolas Bourriaud, Rottenberg's works seek to capture the inundation of human activities through digital means, linking production and consumption, leisure and work.⁴ These connections are elucidated, in part, by the marriage of edifice and orifice—architecture and the body—within Rottenberg's work. Her use of bodies and diminutive spaces serve



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as the entry points to other spaces, sites of production, structures for creating commodities, or the commodities themselves. Through the intricately built-up spaces and amorphous narratives of her films, Rottenberg's work ultimately reveals the labor that produces the world around us through a method of dissection and exposure of systems and processes.

Mika Rottenberg (b. 1976, Buenos Aires, Argentina) lives and works in New York. Rottenberg's work has been exhibited internationally at: Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017 (Münster, Germany), The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Humlebæk, Denmark), Palais de Tokyo (Paris, France), the Venice Biennale (2015), the Israel Museum (Jerusalem, Israel), Magasin III (Stockholm, Sweden), FRAC Languadoc-Roussillon (Montpellier, Canada), Nottingham Contemporary (Nottingham, United Kingdom), M – Museum Leuven (Leuven, Belgium), De Appel Arts

Centre (Amsterdam, Netherlands), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, United States), La Maison Rouge (Paris, France), KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin, Germany), and MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center (New York, United States). Her work was also included in the Taipei Biennial (2014), the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013), the Whitney Biennial (2008), and the Cuban Biennial (2000). Her works are held in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum, Magasin 3, Murakami Collection, the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, among others.

Notes

- 1 Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Mika Rottenberg's Video Spaces," in *Mika Rottenberg: the production of luck* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & co. in association with the Rose Art Museum, 2014).
- 2 The allergic symptoms are a recurrent element from previous works, where the use of sneezing is incorporated by Rottenberg as another means of production, whereas the absurdity lies in the exaggeration of sneezing to produce actual tangible goods, such as noodles.
- 3 "Mika Rottenberg: Social Surrealism," YouTube video, 32:57, posted by "Louisiana Channel, The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art," September 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_eKV76E2K8.
- 4 Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2016. "MIKA ROTTENBERG le réel et le travail. (French)." *Art-Press* no. 435: 42-47. *Art Full Text* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost.

Images

- 1 *AC Trio*, 2015. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.
- 2 *Ponytails*, 2014. Mixed media. Edition of 3 with 1AP. © Mika Rottenberg. Image courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo by Lance Brewer.
- 3 *Lips (study #3)*, 2016. Single channel video installation, mixed media. Edition 2 of 6 with 1 AP. © Mika Rottenberg. Image courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo by Pierre Le Hors.
- 4 *Cosmic Generator (loaded #2)*, 2017. Video installation. Dimensions variable, duration approximately 26 min. 6 variants with 1AP. Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. This work was commissioned by Skulptur Projekte Münster and was produced with generous support from Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Outset and Polyeco.

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