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Untitled #1
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Screen Space

All images of works courtesy of the artist

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SCREEN SPACE



Untitled #1

Tania Smith



“While I waited for my mother to notice me, I would sit at her dressing table and fiddle with her perfume bottles...I would push the two wings of the mirror inwards or outwards, until the two side mirrors were reflecting each other and I could see thousands of Orhans shimmering in deep, cold, glass-coloured infinity. When I looked into the nearest reflections, the strangeness of the back of my head would shock me...Even more interesting was the back of my neck, which made me feel as if my body were a stranger I carried with me – the thought is still chilling.”

- Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul

Recorded in his memoir, Pamuk was stricken at his first eerie glimpse of the immaterial self via a reflection of his body. In this moment he stumbled upon a gulf of reflexive self-awareness that all human children must traverse on their way to adulthood.

The idea that our minds may exist separately from our bodies is a thought that has indeed been chilling us since ancient times. It underlines our existence in myriad ways, an unsolved “cultural problem” repeatedly addressed by religion, spirituality, politics, ethics, art and science alike. For women, mind/body slippage is polarised and sharpened on a daily basis: minds which for centuries have been undervalued, atop bodies which have been vastly over-emphasised. It is no accident that Pamuk discovered this slippage while inhabiting the site of his mother’s daily toilette: a platform engineered to alienate a woman from herself.

In a culture which understands itself through images, feminist art, with its legacy of confrontational, provocative and visceral performance, has continually mounted urgent challenges to how we display, receive and relate to women’s bodies. Tania Smith’s *Untitled* series (2010-Present), enters the fray at an interesting point in this tradition. Like many other feminist artists of her generation (Clare Rae and Hannah Raisin are local contemporaries who come immediately to mind), Smith places herself in her work to reconfigure representations of women in the landscape in subtle and complex ways. And whilst clearly operating in a lineage of feminist art practice, she is also unconsciously mirroring vernacular currents in online image-making.

GENIES AND BOTTLES

In *Untitled #1*, the artist/protagonist stumbles into the scene from right of frame. The backdrop is an isolated suburban (or perhaps rural) backstreet in a semi-industrial zone. In a plain blue shift dress, with long socks and covered arms, Smith’s costume is aesthetically rendered into the landscape. Strangely mute, the scene gives little character detail with which to form a judgement of this woman. It’s costume as decoy, leading the viewer to and then away from the usual cues by which we interpret women. She clutches a pillow tightly to her chest, which is soon flung forward by arms outstretched, its contents emptied on the wind. Then, crouched on the ground, she attempts to retrieve the discarded feathers, and stuff them back into the pillowcase. It is a deceptively simple, gestural work that opens onto a world of ideas and cultural moments.

LABOUR

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the late-1960s New York performance artist, once asked: “After the

revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” The delightful eruption at the start of Smith’s work - the emptying of the pillow - is somewhat eclipsed by the drudgery that follows. Both the pillow and the cleaning-up can be read as allusions to what we call “women’s work”: domestica. It would be too simplistic, however, to assume that the destruction of the pillow and its futile recomposition repeat a common critique of traditional gender roles: there is more going on here. As the energy of the first section of the video slowly winds down then dissipates, sliding from urgency, to doggedness, to a sort of zen, *wabi-sabi* ritualism, the retrieval of dispersed elements becomes elevated to the focus of the piece: another bait and switch. Invoking Ukeles’s labour poetics, Smith asserts an uncomfortable class dynamic inherent to feminist disavowal of domestic labour, re-positing ‘women’s work’ as ‘care work’ and demanding the audience’s acknowledgement of this repetitive task - the price of admission to the party, you might say.

HADOUKENING

Hadouken is a special attack technique used in the arcade game *Street Fighter*. A Japanese word which translates to something like ‘wave motion fist’, it describes a power surge which emanates from one combatant’s palms, held in an open gesture, which, when deployed correctly, knocks the opponent backwards off the ground in a huge thrust of energy. The person deploying Hadouken stands in a lunge, not moving, drawing this ball of explosive light from an unseen, inner realm. Translated into a recent participatory social media meme, the Hadouken becomes *Hadoukening*. Participants mimic a Hadouken pose, and their accomplices leap into the air, backwards and away from them, with cameras poised to catch the whole assemblage.

A compelling subset of *Hadoukening* memes are those made by Japanese schoolgirls. In long skirts and boxy jackets, these are not the Japanese schoolgirls of the pornographic occidental imagination: they are just teenagers (albeit, teenagers engaged in a fascinating collaborative image-making practice). Their ordinariness and a-sexuality are exactly what makes the images striking. Smith’s plain clothed approach in *Untitled #1* similarly denies the prevailing cultural equation between female power and sexuality, that sees an increase in one almost always matched by an increase in the other. The refusal of both sets of images to engage with explicit sexuality (although you could argue the energy expressed in them is a kind of *jouissance*, or generalised expression of ‘life’s longing for itself’) radically reconfigures female bodies in the world in a way that perhaps should not feel as compelling, as revelatory as it does.

PLAY

Another commonality between the *Hadoukening* meme and Smith’s work is their shared sense of elation. The *Hadoukening* teens do not look angry, aggressive, overwhelmed or scared by the pretend power they wield. They are not role-playing or even play-fighting; they are in fact image-making, re-visioning themselves in the cultural narrative. Fun becomes a crucial aspect, and having a huge amount of fun doing it, both in the moment of the action being performed and recorded, and in a future moment of anticipation for the successfully illusory result. This sort of elation, glee and indulgence is also palpable in *Untitled #1*: not a performance of happiness, but rather an embodiment of it. It is also an immersion in an autotelic flow, traditionally the preserve of the male protagonist (and the male artist), which subtly works against fraudulent dichotomies of behaviour set up by evolutionary psychology: ie. woman evolved as multi-tasker, incapable of sustained attentions, incapable of fully occupying herself.

Smith’s work may have little materially to do with *Hadoukening*, it’s true. However, the parallel imminence of such potent political strategies, embedded in such enjoyable creative practices, emerging from as disparate locations as an online Japanese meme and contemporary Australian feminist art-ways, is as delightfully compelling as it is unlikely.

But Tania Smith’s world is a playground full of such small pleasures and tiny ruptures in the diurnal structures to which we are all inevitably bound. Her gentle skewing of femininity, female embodiment and performativity are deceptively light of touch. She combines humour, costume, composition and play in sophisticated ways to upset a pernicious cultural binary that sees female bodies as either controlled automatons, or horrific, chaotic agents of destruction- with few points between. The exquisite transgressions of the *Untitled* series are private performances to and of the self, opening up space for a playful relationship between female bodies and female minds which somehow evades underpinning by oppressive binaries and patriarchal mass media.

Jessie Scott

¹ Pamuk, Orhan, “Istanbul: Memories and the City”, pp. 77-78, Faber and Faber, 2006.

² Ukeles, Mierle Laderman, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!”, cited: www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf

³ In Ukeles’s “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” she likens the repetitive maintenance labour of mothers, street sweepers, maids, sanitation workers and others to the labour of the artist. As a new mother at the time Ukeles was concerned about the strict separation of art production and domestic labour expected of and imposed upon her as part of this role.

