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# ARTnews

## MIKA ROTTENBERG Gets Surreal

The Dalí Sculpture Mess  
Design, Duchamp, and High-Concept Chairs  
'Gossip Girl' Secret: The Art Is Real

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On the set of *4 (for W)*, 2008, C-print, Mika Rottenberg takes a stand.



Drawing on Karl Marx and P. T. Barnum, **Mika Rottenberg** casts women with extreme physical attributes in her surreal, funny videos

# FINGERNAILS, SWEAT, & TEARS

BY BARBARA POLLACK

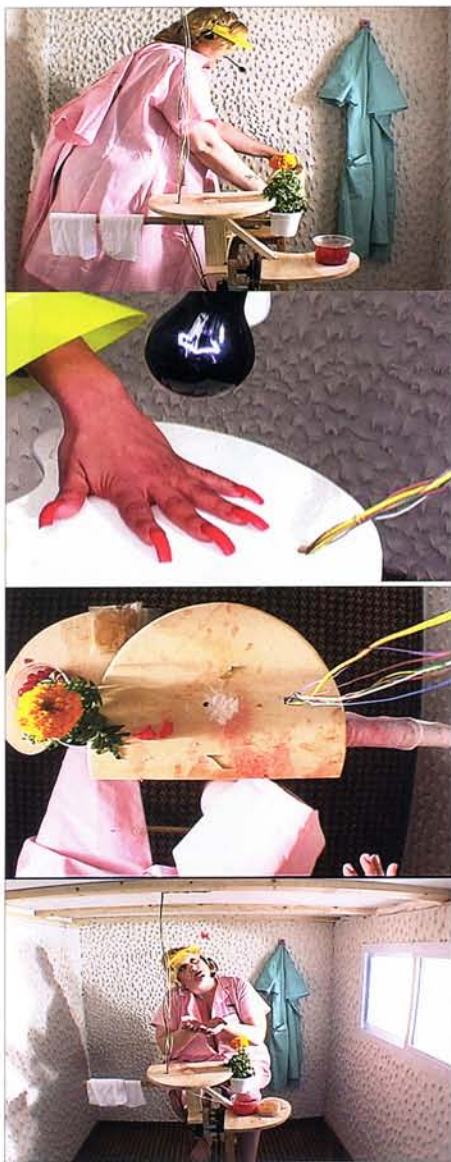
AT THE OPENING OF THIS YEAR'S WHITNEY BIENNIAL, two women with freakishly long blond hair stole the show. They weren't artists or collectors, and they weren't wearing hair extensions. They were genuine hair devotees, with floor-length locks worthy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, who had performed in Mika Rottenberg's video installation *Cheese*.

On the third floor, the work itself—six video channels embedded in a labyrinth of wooden slats and barnyard stalls—was also drawing attention. Viewers were lined up to enter the installation, which was inspired by the story of the Sutherland Sisters, a 19th-century septet featured in Barnum & Bailey's circus for their wondrous hair.

Rottenberg's own hair is brown and curly. In contrast to the women with extreme physical attributes who perform in her videos, she looks ordinary. Short and compact, she's wearing a T-shirt and jeans as she greets a visitor to her studio, located on a dead-end street in Harlem lined with loading docks. It's cramped and seems barely large enough to contain the elabo-

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY THE ARTIST



rate sets she creates for her works, like the warren of claustrophobic rooms two young men are putting together for her latest project. It will feature some of Rottenberg's favorite performers from her past videos: Raqui, the obese bombshell from *Dough* (2005-6), and Heather Foster, the African American bodybuilder from *Tropical Breeze* (2004). And then there's Cat, who is six feet nine, and Lea Redmond, who flaunts 36-inch-long fingernails.

Using drawings, videos, photographs, and sculpture, Rottenberg began exploring extreme appearances and gender politics before she graduated from Columbia University's M.F.A. program in 2004. "Mika is a sculptor who works with everything available to an artist today, which is fascinating," says curator Klaus Biesenbach, who featured her in "New Work/New Acquisitions" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2005. Rottenberg had already done a video installation, *Mary's Cherries*, at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in 2004 and was included in the "Greater New York" show there in 2005.

In *Mary's Cherries*, three women sit in an unadorned space, a homemade construction with creaky seams and blotches of plaster on the walls. In a Rube Goldberg-like assembly line,

one woman clips her long red fingernails, another mashes them into a glob of red goo, and the third, an enormous blond with pendulous breasts, rolls the mess into a bright shiny ball, like a maraschino cherry. Humorous and surreal, the video is an astute observation of the mind-numbing tasks often performed by women employed in manufacturing consumer goods or, more pointedly, in the service of other women in nail salons.

"The body was always a big part of my work, that and the mechanisms—

gears and machinery—in assemblages I made even as a teenager," says Rottenberg. She learned about movie making as a child from her father, who made a living in real estate but also worked in film production. She appeared in some of the films, but it was the "production behind the scenes" she loved, more than the acting.

**BORN IN BUENOS AIRES IN 1976**, Rottenberg was brought up in Israel and speaks with a slight Israeli accent. Although she believes that there is nothing specifically "Israeli" about her work, and she rejects the label "Israeli artist," Rottenberg acknowledges that she was influenced by the worldview of her parents, who were both raised on kibbutz. "That socialist ideology is something that I grew up on, even though they both left the kibbutz and became total capitalists," she says.

The kibbutz was also the setting for family visits, where Rottenberg saw farm animals and agricultural production—experiences that inform her projects. "I have distinct mem-

ories of them milking the cows and all the machinery and all those suction cups and all that weirdness," she recalls.

Rottenberg achieves weirdness almost effortlessly, even when she is not using strange-looking actors. In *Julie* (2003), one of her first videos, a gymnast walks on her hands across a snowy landscape. Rottenberg turns the camera upside down, making it seem as if the woman is dangling in the sky while clinging to an icy ceiling. "In one simple move, Mika suggests that the artist can see the world in another way," says Mark Beasley, curator at Creative Time, which showed the video on the mammoth high-definition MTV screen in Times Square in October. "I think that as an action it is very simple but very powerful."

From the beginning, Rottenberg shot her videos expertly; they are always well edited and lit. "It's most important for me to consider how it's going to look, just as if it were a painting," says Rottenberg, who now employs a cinematographer. "If it is meant to look goofy, well, that is a decision," she adds.

For *Tropical Breeze*, which she made while still at Columbia, Rottenberg built a set within a moving truck. There are two women. The first picks up a tissue with her toes, attaches it with a wad of gum to a line, and then pedals a contraption that moves the line to the front of the truck. The second woman is Foster, the stunning bodybuilder, who plucks the tissue off the line and uses it to wipe the sweat off her neck and face as she drives the truck. Then she sends the tissue back to the first woman, who carefully presses it and packages it in boxes labeled "Tropical Breeze Pre-Moistened Tissues." The video is full of funny asides: a naked man runs by and waves to the driver as the truck goes along the road; when Foster takes a swig of lemon soda, the resulting box of tissues is labeled "lemon scented." But nothing is as funny as what Rottenberg did to follow up on this project.

"I was reading Marx's *Capital*, and Marx's theory of labor and value states that the only right way to measure value is by the amount of labor invested in an object," recalls Rottenberg. "I was also thinking about this in relation to sculpture and women's labor, and I wanted to make a piece that would capture all that." So, as the ultimate trial of Marxist theory, Rottenberg and Foster decided to sell boxes of *Tropical Breeze*

tissues on eBay, not only as a test of the value of a work of art, but also to see how much Foster's fans would pay for her sweat. "They didn't sell," says Rottenberg, who priced the boxes at \$350 each. "In this instance, I thought because they were used, it would make them more valuable."

Her works do better at Nicole Klagsbrun in New York, her gallery, where small drawings fetch \$5,000, and total installations, up to \$100,000.

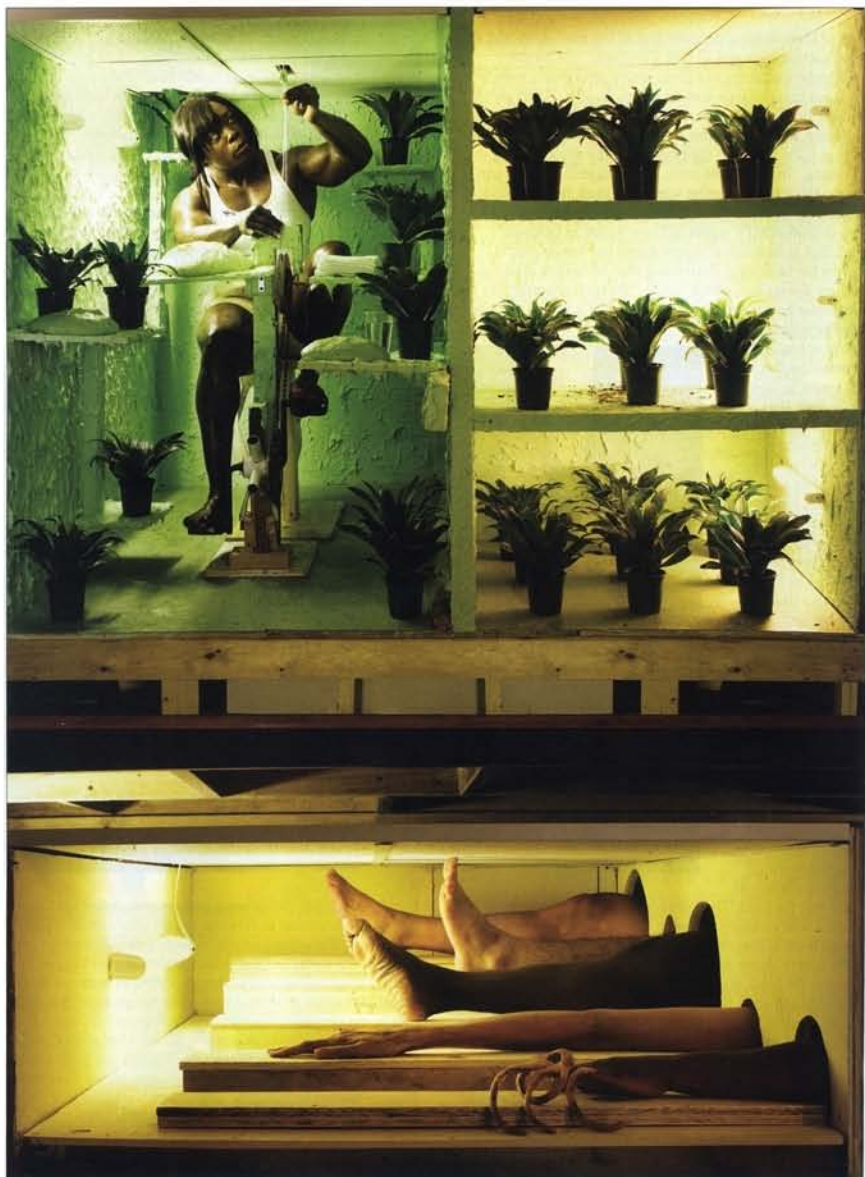
**ROTTENBERG DEFINES HERSELF** as primarily a sculptor, and in many ways she treats video as just another material. She builds the sets, often creating claustrophobic environments with plaster pockmarks on the walls. Then, as a final act, she recycles the set as an installation in which viewers can see the video. This was the case with *Dough*, which was first shown at Nicole



Klagsbrun in 2006. In that work, visitors were forced to enter a plywood construction to view the equally discomfiting video.

In *Dough*, Rottenberg sets up another assembly line of women, who knead, inflate, punch, and finally package an extremely unappealing mass of dough. Raqui, an immense dark-haired performer, prods and pushes the dough down through a hole to the next woman on the line. When she finishes this task, she flips her worktable over to reveal a fan and a flower, to which she has an allergic reaction. As tears run down her body, they are funneled, drop by drop, onto another batch of dough, causing it to rise.

Rottenberg finds performers like Raqui by searching the Internet for people who have listed their "special skills" for hire. (Raqui charges a fee to sit on people, and Foster advertises her services as a personal trainer.) "These people are already rent-



ing out their bodies," says Rottenberg, who finds this intriguing. "Perhaps I am using them in a way that is a little bit different than they intend, but I am still using their services."

The Internet served Rottenberg well with *Cheese*. The work is based on the story of the long-haired Sutherland sisters from upstate New York. Taking advantage of their popularity as an attraction in Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth in the 1880s, they made a fortune from the sales of a hair tonic concocted by their father. Rottenberg was fascinated by their advertising tactics; the Sutherlands claimed that their tonic included mist collected from Niagara Falls (it was actually about one-third alcohol). "Now every shampoo advertisement features a waterfall, but they were the first," she says.

Searching the Web for women with extremely long hair, Rottenberg found Lady Grace, a woman in central Florida with hair more than eight feet long, who helped her locate others. Lady Grace invited

**OPPOSITE 3 (for W), 2008, C-print showing a section of an elaborate multichambered set Rottenberg built in her Harlem studio.**

**RIGHT *Cheese*, 2008, a multichannel video installation, was shown at the Whitney Biennial. In the inset, four women "milk" a fifth woman's hair.**

Rottenberg to her hometown of Bushnell, where the artist wound up living for nine months while she worked on the project. A local bed-and-breakfast with a petting zoo allowed her to use its extensive property, and Rottenberg built a miniature farm there, with occasional help from a friend. "Everything was handmade without drills or electricity, just as in the 19th century," she says.

The entire farm, covering one acre, was taken apart and reconfigured for the installation at the Whitney. In the museum, viewers could walk through the pens and watch the videos showing the cast of long-haired beauties chasing sheep, gathering eggs, and making cheese, often in bizarre ways.

In 2006, before she had completed the project, Rottenberg presented an early version of the video, as a preview of a coming attraction, at the Frieze Art Fair, where she won the Cartier Award that year. She brought Lady Grace along for the event, and they set up a table, dispensing free hair advice.

"It was fantastic," says Lady Grace. "I love talking about long hair, and I love giving tips to people. To have long hair is like

being an artist. You have to ask what kind of artist are you going to be—a minor artist or a great artist? To me it is an art form, absolutely."

**"MIKA ALWAYS HAD IDEAS** about presentation, gender, notions of production and labor in her work, but this was even more ambitious," comments Shamim Momin, cocurator of the Whitney Biennial. Rottenberg has recently channeled these obsessions into a broader project, *Infinite Earth*, a nonprofit based in Germany that will fund workshops and businesses in rural communities all over the world through the sale of artworks. The first venture has been to support a weaving business in Chamba, India, through sales of an edition of prints created by Rottenberg and artist Alona Harpaz, which raised \$40,000. When she is not working on her art or *Infinite Earth*,



Rottenberg spends time at a rented house in Tivoli, New York. She likes to swim and listen to music; recently she drove five hours to attend a Radiohead concert in New Jersey.

Rottenberg is currently working on a solo project with Allison Gass, assistant curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. When asked about it, the artist declines to offer details. "I like working on big projects without having a deadline, because a deadline really limits it," she says. "Maybe it's going to take me five years, or maybe six months."

Gass says that Rottenberg "is extending the narrative about what it means to be a woman in our society and what it means to be a woman artist at the same time." For Rottenberg, this level of praise and success is a little disorienting. "When I was a teenager, I was always making art, but I didn't know people existed as full-time artists," she says. "I thought it was a wild kind of dream. But then I thought, why not try?" ■