

Small Camera Delivers Immersive Experience: Mika Rottenberg's 'Squeeze' at SF MoMA

By Jon Silberg, August 31, 2010

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The affordability of filmmaking tools has helped artists express themselves in new ways—modern art museums throughout the country are staging more elaborate video installations than ever before. Through the end of October, visitors to San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art can see an intriguing example in artist Mika Rottenberg's immersive installation, *Squeeze*, which combines bizarre juxtapositions of images and an all-encompassing maze-like room to form a surreal, humorous take on the concept of manufacturing.

Born in Argentina, raised in Israel and currently living in New York, Rottenberg has created installations for prominent institutions including New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation New York. For *Squeeze*, she shot women in an old-style rubber plantation in remote India and combined that material with whimsical video of a very odd-looking set she had built in a Harlem warehouse. The finished video creates strange illusions such as that of the women on the plantation putting their hands through a hole in the ground and having them come up through a similar opening in the set to receive a manicure. Video plays continuously inside the labyrinthine space created at SFMOMA for the piece.



When a frequent collaborator, cinematographer Mahyad Tousi, suggested using a Canon EOS 7D DSLR for the video, she was on board right away. "I love the idea of using such a small camera," she says. "I don't work with professional actors. A bigger camera can intimidate people, but the 7D didn't have that effect at all. We could mount it in just about any space we wanted without any trouble at all, and that helped me capture some authentic moments in the rubber plantation."

For Tousi, the camera came in particularly handy for the material shot on the set after they returned from India. "Mika builds very tight spaces," the cinematographer says, noting that this collapsible set—

designed to suggest a cold office or factory—was 30 feet wide and only five feet tall when opened fully. "They're designed for their aesthetic use within the overall piece of art, not for shooting in. It would be very difficult to get a big camera crew in her sets, and we didn't need to for this."



Set engineer Quentin Conybeare and practical special effects artist Katrin Altekamp helped design the strange environment. Models of similar skin tone to the women on the plantation participated in the studio shoot. Tousi lit the set with some very large Kino Flos far away and some fluorescent practicals to make everything feel "like that kind of impersonal office lighting we've all seen," the cinematographer says. He then used a series of Dedolights to provide accents and texture.

"It doesn't look like a realistic factory," the artist explains. "The work is 'documentary' and 'not documentary' mixed together."

Rottenberg transcoded the H.264 signal initially recorded to the 7D's CF cards to ProRes 422 HQ and then spent more than four months editing and shaping the piece, using sound design by Tel Aviv-based sound artist Ronen Nagel to help tie the disparate imagery together into a unified artistic statement.

At no time was the 7D's tiny footprint more apparent than during the one shooting day on the plantation. They needed a sweeping camera move and the only appropriate piece of equipment available was an enormous 70-year-old crane. "If we had been in Mumbai, we could have gotten anything we wanted, but the only thing we could get anywhere near this little village we were in was this crazy old thing from the 1940s," Tousi notes. "If you've ever seen the movie *After the Fox* with Peter Sellers, it's that kind of crane. I think this is the crane from that movie, and it was old even then!

"It was very funny to have this little 7D on that giant crane."