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Mika Rottenberg

NICOLE KLAGSBRUN GALLERY

The blood-chilling term *efficiency expert* was coined in the early twentieth century by mechanical engineer and management consultant Frederick Taylor, who famously timed factory employees to encourage them to work faster. Mika Rottenberg's videos of women performing mindless, repetitive tasks might do Taylor proud if they didn't also reveal his system's utter lack of humanity. In Rottenberg's latest video, *Dough*, 2005–2006, a six-minute loop, the eponymous product is manufactured via an obscure and complicated process that requires the use of a fluorescent lamp and an inhaler, as well as an endless supply of vacuum packs, gerbera daisies, and human tears.

As in an earlier Rottenberg work called *Mary's Cherries*, 2003, the factory is divided into seven chambers with holes leading from one to the next. The next-to-uppermost room is occupied by a colossally fat woman wearing a drab brown uniform monogrammed with the name *Raqui*. Raqui is a multitasker: Not only does she route the dough down to the other three women, but her tears appear to contain a magical catalyst that causes the dough to rise. Raqui kneads the dough into a rope (read: umbilical cord) and slowly lowers it to her colleague, who, not incidentally, happens to be almost seven feet tall

and extremely skinny. The dough is then guided gently past a fluorescent lamp before being passed to the two women on a lower level. This pair separates it into pieces on a conveyor belt. In order to generate more dough, Raqui sniffs a bouquet of flowers that kick-starts her hay fever (one of the women on the second-to-lowest level rotates a hand lever that operates a small fan, which apparently helps blow the pollen up Raqui's nose). As she sniffls, large tears roll down her imposing bulk through another small hole in the floor, and the steam that appears when they land causes the dough to rise. Raqui takes a puff on an inhaler, pauses a minute to regain her composure, and the process begins again.

Unlike *Mary's Cherries*, a rambunctious, absurdist romp involving the manufacture of maraschino cherries, *Dough* has a slightly menacing feel. The confines seem more suffocating and the women a little less cheerful, a little more resigned. But *Dough* is just as fast-moving and at least as engaging as the earlier work. Rottenberg is a masterful editor, cutting deftly from one room to another. The sound (produced in a recording studio) is also effective: We hear the buzz of a generator, the whirl of a fan, the sizzle when the tears hit the hot floor. These seemingly throwaway details conspire to give the work the light touch of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin (and indeed, Chaplin's classic *Modern Times*, 1936, seems like the most obvious precursor), while her use of props evokes Matthew Barney minus the ostentation.

Rottenberg's videos are projected within installations that reproduce elements of their sets. In the case of *Dough*, this means soul-sucking drop ceilings and fluorescent lights. In these close quarters, viewers are forced to think about their own relation to the women onscreen. Are we being put in the position of managers scrutinizing them for lapses in attention? The possibility leaves us feeling distinctly uneasy. Even as we delight in the antic choreography and jerry-built machinery, we are made uncomfortably aware of our own privileged status.

Two of Taylor's admirers, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (pioneers in the field of "motion study" whose efforts to Taylorize child rearing were immortalized in the 1948 book *Cheaper by the Dozen*), enthusiastically touted film as a way of measuring and monitoring work habits. Consciously exploiting our position as passive observers, *Dough* taps into the complex relationship between video technology and human labor, and the result is more than a little ominous. We leave knowing that the video will go on and on, without a break.

—Claire Barliant



Mika Rottenberg, *Dough* (detail), 2005–2006, two single channel videos, drop ceiling, fan, hot plate, linoleum floor, Sheetrock, and water, dimensions variable, 6 minutes.