

# ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

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## Mika Rottenberg

MARY BOONE GALLERY

The Rube Goldberg contraption explored in Mika Rottenberg's video *Squeeze*, 2010, is simultaneously a single machine, a full-blown factory, and a global system. A literal sweatshop, this jerry-built structure is at once concrete, fantastical, and metaphorical, its ricketyness no contradiction of the grinding realities it indexes. Filmed in part in far-flung locations and in part on an elaborate homemade set, the work describes a peculiar processing plant, its layout ungraspable not just as a space with a certain footprint but as a site on the planet. For one thing, it seems to have portals on different continents, opening directly onto cool rubber-tree groves in India as well as onto the vast, sun-drenched fields of arable America. This *Phantom Tollbooth* quality is reflected when hands pushed vertically into holes in the earth by workers outside the plant emerge inside it, horizontally, from holes in the wall. Defying not merely geography but gravity, the plant's position nowhere, beyond dimension, logically also puts it everywhere, as distant as Asia and as nearby as here, unlimited in its reach, unconfined to one place.

The plant seems to be run by a female supervisor who occasionally munches on a white-bread sandwich and whose comfort is alternately catered to by a heater, a fan, and a footbath of ice. Beside her a large black woman sits like a sumo wrestler, in a spinning drum—I suspect she is the dynamo the system draws on, the energy source it sucks off. In a cramped space below, women use heavy pestles to stamp and squash materials that cycle in front of them: heads of lettuce, sheets of rubber, compact-case containers of blush. Here and there, hands and buttocks, lips and tongues poke through walls to be variously tended and moisturized—as machine parts are oiled—by makeshift devices, the supervisor, and a crew of Asian manicurists. Somewhere above, another woman, a robust blonde like the supervisor, is periodically squeezed in a mattress-lined press until she emits an apparently instrumental orange liquid. Between bouts in the press, she collects her sweat, which becomes an ingredient of the cosmetic blush that the pestle-wielding women will later mash. A factory's usual interaction of flesh and machinery is here extended, the two interlocking organically to become indistinguishable.

Outside, Hispanic workers load lettuce onto conveyor belts and Indian workers collect the milky sap of rubber trees and pass it to a chain of molds and scrubbers. Channeled and shaped at the plant through a cutely erotic sequence of holes and slides, these raw materials finally become an ambiguous product: an ugly cube of animal and vegetable derivatives, crumpled like waste. A nearly life-size photo in the gallery shows the art dealer Mary Boone (who produced the show in conjunction with Rottenberg's own dealer Nicole Klagsbrun), immaculately glamorous as always, cheerfully offering up this repugnant lump. Repugnant but precious:

According to a shipping slip roughly taped to the wall, the cube now lies in a storage facility in a notorious tax refuge, the Cayman Islands.

As visual experience the film combines grotesque yet precise imagination with surprising lyric touches, as in the views of the green grid of tapped rubber trees, each with a loose bandage of blue plastic. Matthew Barney is surely a predecessor; I also think of David Cronenberg and of, earlier, Jean Cocteau. What's special to Rottenberg is her sense of physicality—her insistence on fat and weight, secretion and sweat, and specifically on the female body, her central characters being all big women, unconventionally beautiful. A theme of her work is the disjunct between the conventions of beauty imposed on women, in part through the cosmetics industry, and the strictures imposed on them by the actuality of labor, by work and working conditions, the whole being here tied together by visual rhymes between rubber and cellulite, between a head of lettuce and a head of hair. At a time when virtual space rules, Rottenberg reminds us of our actual solidity, of the material stubbornness of the body and so of the systems it depends on for nurture. Her factory becomes a stand-in for these worldwide systems, an international network of traffic and trade whose realities are easily ignored. *Squeeze* is a rare fusion of politics and poetry.

—David Frankel

Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010, still from a color video, 20 minutes.

