

Art in America

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INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Mika Rottenberg: *Squeeze*, 2010, video installation, 20 minutes; at SFMOMA. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery / Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

SAN FRANCISCO

MIKA ROTTENBERG SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

ON VIEW THROUGH OCT. 3

Grinding industrial machinery and sweating bodies merge in a bizarre assembly line in Mika Rottenberg's new video *Squeeze* (2010). The 20-minute piece runs on a loop, shifting between documentary footage of female factory workers in India producing gelatinous slabs of rubber, migrant workers in Arizona hacking heads of lettuce from their stalks with long blades and staged vignettes shot in several makeshift chambers in Rottenberg's studio. The artist edits the footage in such a way that the point of view frequently shifts and physical distances seem to collapse, connecting all of the workers in a byzantine network of labor. For instance, the rubber workers in India thrust their arms into holes

in the ground to receive manicures from a row of Asian women filmed in Rottenberg's studio, where large women sweat, are squeezed between contracting walls and meditate, their energies seemingly harvested to fuel the pulverizing of lettuce, rubber and cakes of makeup that are then compressed into a repulsive new product.

Squeeze calls to mind Fritz Lang's futuristic vision in the film *Metropolis* (1927) as well as Matthew Barney's totalizing cosmologies and surreal exploitation of the body in his "Cremaster Cycle." While *Metropolis* imagined the impending toll of rampant capitalism, Rottenberg conveys a nightmare derived from contemporary labor conditions and the global economy's dependence on cheap goods. The video conflates the repetitive rhythms of human labor with the relentless push of machinery to underscore the maintenance and manipulation of women's bodies as a core concern.

The installation that houses the projection of *Squeeze* is less convincing than the disturbing world that Rottenberg has so fully realized in the video. A life-size photograph of gallerist Mary Boone greets viewers upon entering a narrow hallway that leads around sharp corners to a small viewing chamber. To create a spatial compression that echoes the confined spaces in the video is the intent, but the relationship is negligible. The dealer, wearing her trademark power suit and stilettos, holds a cube of the rubber/lettuce/blush product from the video; her nose wrinkles in bemused revulsion: with an art dealer's alchemy, she will turn trash into treasure. This reference to the art world is a reminder of the larger system of production that subsumes Rottenberg's own labor, and a visualization of the otherwise invisible connection between the financial operations of a Manhattan gallery and the subsistence wages of farm workers or sweatshop laborers. All this should be effective when *Squeeze* opens at Mary Boone Gallery in New York later this month [Oct. 30-Dec. 18], but at SFMOMA, where most visitors didn't seem to recognize Boone's image, it was a puzzling, self-referential distraction from an important new work.

—Kirsten Swenson