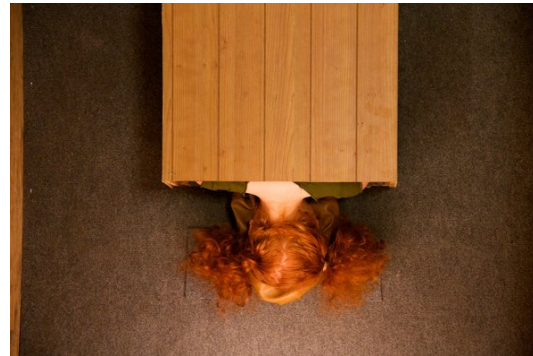




The New York Times Style Magazine

## Artifacts | 'Squeeze' Therapy

By LINDA YABLONSKY  
November 24, 2010, 2:57 pm



Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery  
A film still from "Squeeze" by Mika Rottenberg.

A woman's work is definitely never done in a Mika Rottenberg video. I mean really never. The women in her latest, "Squeeze" — one of the bigger attractions in Chelsea right now — submit to the drudgery of their assembly-line labors without a peep, as if that were all life was about. Seen in Arizona and India and confined to a spa-from-hell in Rottenberg's Harlem studio, they pick lettuce, collect rubber sap, stretch it into latex, massage sore hands and manufacture blush from the scrapings of their own reddened cheeks. And all they get out of it is more work.

What we get out of it, however, is art-in-a-box, which is what the women in "Squeeze" are really making: a sculpted mash of trash: pulped iceberg lettuce, crushed makeup tins, dirt, fingernails and sweat, all done up in a neat minimalist cube. The finished product is not in Rottenberg's show at the Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea, except in a hilarious promotional photograph of the primly dressed Boone, who holds it in her palm as if it were giving off a bad smell. Which it probably is. And which all exploited labor, even by artists, should. "The shoot with Mary was lots of fun," Rottenberg says. "I kept yelling at her to imagine she was holding a freshly baked pie, the most precious object in the world, a vacuum cleaner and so forth, and saying: 'Show it to me! Yes! I want it! You got it!'"

The photograph hangs outside an intimate black-box screening room that Rottenberg made for the show, which Boone is presenting in collaboration with the artist's primary dealer, Nicole Klagsbrun. Viewers inside it can watch the horror show in comfort. Shot by Mahyad Tousi, it features small groups of women — white, black, Indian, Mexican and Chinese -- who stand in for a global beauty industry in which outsourced minority laborers never see or profit from the fruits of their work.

One woman's enormous bulk is confined to a lazy susan set into the equivalent of a dumbwaiter. Another gets her head squeezed in a vise. The lettuce pickers reach through the dirt in Arizona, only to have their hands massaged by manicurists in New York who in real life work in a nail salon where Rottenberg gets her legs waxed. Hoses mounted to the ceiling spray bare buttocks protruding from the wall like misters spraying the lettuce in a supermarket. A large pink tongue pokes through another wall to wag at a buxom matron who oversees the factory/spa, an ingenious contraption of sliding walls, floors and doors where much of the action takes place. It was inspired by a squeeze mechanism invented by the autistic animal science professor Temple Grandin, who uses it, Rottenberg said, to calm herself down. But, she says, "Building this huge construction did not calm me down."

Because there is a certain futility to the obsessive nature of the women's endless labor, on which they also thrive, I wondered if Rottenberg was making an analogy to her own creative process. "Oh boy," she said. "I don't know what it's all for. Since my work is about work, I get confused sometimes about my role in it. I think this piece is a way for me to make sense of it."

"Squeeze" is on view through Dec. 18 at the Mary Boone Gallery, 541 West 24th Street.