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new work



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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
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Mika Rottenberg was born in Argentina, raised in Tel Aviv, and now lives in New York. She makes feminist art decades after feminism was legibly defined. She makes seriously political art that is preposterously funny. She documents reality, but spins it into narrative fiction. Rottenberg's biography and work may at times feel like a jumble of contradictory elements, but it is precisely through such unexpected combinations of binaries that she delivers pointed commentaries about the conditions of her world and ours. Each work is generated over a long period of time during which she selects characters, settings, and concepts; builds expansive sets in uncommon locations; directs and documents the movements of her cast members; edits and creates a video; and constructs the sculptural environment in which the video will be installed.

Rottenberg's earlier works, *Tropical Breeze*, *Dough*, and *Cheese*, point to the way bodies (specifically women's bodies) can be co-opted by the labor market. She casts her projects with women whose crafted or innate physical characteristics are central to their occupation (for example, a body builder, a wrestler, or a woman who holds a world record for her incredibly long hair), then highlights and exaggerates those traits in the service of absurdist machinations. *Tropical Breeze* (2004) depicts a female body builder serving as truck driver. It is a hot day and she is sweating profusely, lifting her massive biceps to wipe her drenched brow with a Kleenex. She affixes each sweat-soaked tissue to a pulley system that transports it to the rear of the truck, where it is retrieved by a contortionist who uses her impossibly long leg to gather this dampened refuse into boxes labeled "Moist Tissues." In *Dough* (2005–6), the body and the product of its physical acts visually conflate. A large woman sits in a compressed space, the squashing of her rolls of fat for-



mally echoed in the squishing of dough through a nearby kneading device. In *Cheese* (2008), Rottenberg once again focuses on bodily materials that overstep the bounds of social norms. Here she engages a cultural subset of women whose floor-length locks place them at the heart of a "cult of hair," extending their story by casting them as the central figures at a mythical farm where their hair oils are extracted to make a product inspired by a nineteenth-century hair tonic.

With *Squeeze* (2010), which premieres at SFMOMA, Rottenberg enters new territory, both literally and metaphorically. She shot documentary footage at a rubber plant in India and at a lettuce farm in Arizona, and spliced it together with scenes of female workers in a paranormal factory (actually a mechanized set constructed in the artist's studio). Through the video's unfolding story line, the otherwise incongruous products from each of these sites are mashed into one mass-produced "art object": a lumpy and subtly revolting cube made of rubber, decomposing lettuce, and blush. Rottenberg's footage of the two real-world labor sites imbues *Squeeze* with a rawness that is unlike the Day-Glo tinge of much of her earlier work. Rottenberg collaborated with actual labor-



Felicia from *Tropical Breeze*, 2004.
Chromogenic print, 19 1/4 x 25 1/4 in.
(48.9 x 64.1 cm)



ers—rather than actors—at each location, and the footage documents their daily activities. Yet she also directed them in instances—for example, asking the featured workers to kneel on the ground in prayer-like poses, their arms inserted into holes dug into the earth, a gesture that will ultimately tie together the discrete worlds presented in the video.

India and Arizona meet up in New York City, where, via the visual slippage of montage, the products of these two labor sites appear to pour into the fabricated factory structure in a large Harlem warehouse. In this fantastical setting, walls move in response to shifts in temperature, telekinesis (performed by a female mystic), and actual physical labor. In the opening scenes a simple space heater causes the cheap drywall and laminate-edged surfaces of a factory break room to contract. At the center of this morphing space is a blond-haired white woman, the stylized epitome of a stereotypical American blue-collar factory worker, who chews a sandwich made of white bread. She waits for the room to slowly close in on her, sitting impassively, her face flushing a deep pink as it is squeezed between the walls. The video, however, remains more absurd than traumatic. In an eerie twist, the woman's skin flakes into a glittering pink dust that in the next shot is transformed into packaged blush—the literal residue of her body at work.

In an even stranger room within Rottenberg's factory, six young Asian women (actually workers from the salon across the street from the artist's studio) sit in a row. The space they occupy is set up as an outrageous massage station, their clients' hands extending from holes in the wall. Through fast-paced cuts, Rottenberg reveals that the hands belong to the women at



the lettuce farm and rubber plant who by lowering their arms into the earth have reached this impossible day spa—a through-the-rabbit-hole fantasy whereby manual laborers are rewarded with luxurious pampering. This bizarre scenario also demonstrates the extent to which the maintenance of a feminine ideal (soft, smooth, shapely hands) often requires that women rely on the labor of other women.

As the manicurists reach for the disembodied hands of their racially different and geographically distant counterparts, an outlandish detail appears: Behind the heads of these beauty technicians, the bare, rounded asses of anonymous women protrude through holes in the wall. This visual is perhaps the artist's most incisive parsing of the tradition of bodily fragmentation in Western art history and visual culture. In these contexts, a woman's behind is a body part that is both fetishized and reviled, sexualized and anti-sexual. Poking through the wall of Rottenberg's factory, however, the shimmering rear ends are neither enticingly offered as sites of visual (or other) pleasure nor positioned as vulgar sources of bodily discharge. Ignored entirely by the workers whose heads drift near them, they are simply soft objects—strange nothings that render the scenario steadfastly improbable if not impossible. Rottenberg has undermined traditional modes of gazing at bodies by obfuscating legible narrative—the absurdity of the situation challenges the desirous gaze.¹

Certainly, Rottenberg's project follows in the vein of Surrealism's tradition of depicting fractured, fragmented, or unanchored body parts in the creation of impossible, metaphorical, or psychologically charged spaces or



Dough, 2005–6 (stills).
Single-channel video sculpture, 7 min., dimensions variable

images. Indeed, feminist scholars have identified such practices in Western art as a longstanding mode of objectifying and hypersexualizing women's bodies in particular.² However, Rottenberg's (specifically female) bodies are not offered up for desirous ogling. Rather, each is far outside the normative standards of idealized femininity, instead lingering on the sidelines of beauty: a pool of decidedly "un-ideal" bodily excess or refuse (such as sweat, fat, and hair oils) and a collection of literal and suggested orifices figure prominently in Rottenberg's nonsensical worlds. Through the use of such elements Rottenberg capitalizes on a strategy developed by feminist artists of the 1970s, who upended traditional presentations of idealized and sexually enticing female bodies. Further, Rottenberg amplifies this upending by capitalizing on a traditionally masculine mode of production: building. Her rough-hewn sets are overt constructions, each work reminding us that this physically slight woman artist has manhandled drills, hammers, and enormous sections of lumber.

As she updates traditions of feminist art practice, Rottenberg uses her factory world to reexamine the nature and value of art objects themselves. Her female laborers are, after all, making art; and certainly, in Western culture, artists and artworks are traditionally positioned as the hierarchical opposite

of factory workers and their products. Since 1917, when Duchamp turned a urinal on its head and entered it in an open call art salon, the impulse to question the value assigned to traditional artistic materials and to the masterful hand of the individual artist—as well as the way in which a gallery or museum context can ascribe value to an art object—has formed the bedrock of much modern art practice. Rottenberg sets these art world tropes against current labor and production conditions in our capitalist economy. Just as in Rottenberg's imagined art factory geographic and cultural boundaries are traversed with a single filmic splice, in our global economy similar boundaries are erased via the sprawling, worldwide production network that produces most of the items available for our consumption. Americans use products and eat foods available in local stores, but these goods retain the indexical trace of a class of laborers who are at a far remove socially, racially, and geographically from the daily lives of consumers.

The surreal video footage in *Squeeze* addresses this very real fact by focusing on the condition of a particular subset of laborers: women. While this has led to the reading of Rottenberg's practice as an engagement with feminist art, it is in many ways anachronistic to call her a feminist artist. The movement does not exist as clearly as it once did, and it is now easier to speak of feminisms, plural, than of feminism as a singular concept; the divergent contingents have become too vast to sweep together. More importantly, many women and men of Rottenberg's generation argue that, while they of course support the movement's political goals, the need for specifically feminist art is past, adding that in effect the relegation of women artists to a separate category resolidifies rather than erases notions of gender difference. While many of the processes and ideas central to feminist art (such as conceptual explorations of gender inequality and the historical subjection of women by an objectifying gaze) are key to understanding Rottenberg's work,



she likewise taps other artistic strategies, including the use of overt satire to isolate and depict stereotypes as a means of exposing them.

Above all, Rottenberg gives a twenty-first-century spin to ideas about what it means to be a woman, a woman worker, or a woman artist. And she reminds us that in certain instances physical labor is prescribed or expected on the basis of race and class. Indian women are rubber plant workers, Mexican women are trucked in to farm lettuce, Asian women labor in beauty salons, a working-class white woman performs repetitive tasks in a factory, and an African American woman is cast as a mystical other. Rottenberg emphasizes that while the political agenda of the seventies may be antiquated, gender politics—across a spectrum of races and cultures—remains central to life and art, and is vital to our critical assessment of both. Significantly, however, she moves beyond gender, acknowledging that it is but one classifier that determines our place in the mechanisms of global economics. Ultimately Rottenberg gives us the world, rendered through a funhouse mirror: Nothing is truly as it appears, yet the reflection contains everything you need to make sense of what you see.

Alison Gass
Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Notes

1. The essential text outlining an early feminist understanding of the objectifying gaze is Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.
2. For a broader discussion of such practices see Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995).



Mika Rottenberg was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and now lives and works in New York. She received a bachelor's degree in fine art from the School of Visual Arts in 2000 and a master's in fine art from Columbia University in 2004. In 2011 she will have a solo exhibition at de Appel in Amsterdam. She has previously had solo exhibitions at numerous venues including La Maison Rouge, Paris; Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York; and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. She was included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial and in *Greater New York*, a 2005 exhibition at PS1. In 2004 she was awarded a grant by the Rema Hort Mann Foundation, and in 2006 she became the first recipient of the Cartier Award, which enables emerging artists based outside the United Kingdom to present a major project at the Frieze Art Fair in London.

Work in the Exhibition

Squeeze
2010
Single-channel video installation, 20 min., dimensions variable
Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery/Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

All images from *Tropical Breeze*, *Dough*, and *Cheese* courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York. All images from *Squeeze* courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery/Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

Reverse: *Squeeze*, 2010 (stills).

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