

Mika Rottenberg's *Squeeze* uses real people to imagine unreal worlds

By Jonathan Curiel Wednesday, Jul 21 2010

Feminist art" is what SFMOMA calls Mika Rottenberg's work. Here's another label: "Chick flicks for thinking men and women." She uses people she finds in public or via the Internet to act out scenes of odd behavior. How odd? How about a woman who grows red fingernails that are turned into maraschino cherries (*Mary's Cherries*, 2003); sisters with floor-length hair who milk their locks to make food (*Cheese*, 2007); or a bodybuilder who flexes tightly to spill his own sweat onto a boiling pan (*Fried Sweat*, 2008)?

Rottenberg's humor has always had a serious edge, but in her latest short film, *Squeeze*, reality and absurdity collide in a 20-minute narrative that screens on a continuous loop at SFMOMA. With no opening title or ending credits, *Squeeze* becomes interpretive art — a film that asks viewers to leave when they think it's over.

Instead of an entire reel of acted-out performances (Rottenberg's usual motif), in *Squeeze* we get documentary film of outdoor labor in India and Arizona, integrated with acted footage from both locations (the workers there were "totally happy" to abide by Rottenberg's direction, she says), integrated with video of scripted doings in New York.

The story centers on a fictional underground factory in New York City that makes a block of art from lettuce, rubber, and blush. *Squeeze* imagines the facility is connected via aboveground holes ("portals," as Rottenberg calls them) to a real lettuce farm in Arizona and an actual rubber plantation in India. Through the openings, a row of women in New York massages the hands of the workers in Arizona and India.

The Southwestern laborers (many of whom are women) stoop in the field, hacking at freshly picked lettuce and hurriedly putting the bunches on a conveyer belt. At the plantation, workers (again, many of them women) extract white goo from trees and rework it into big pieces that resemble mattresses of taffy. The blush in New York is produced from the face of a blonde who — perched above the Asian masseuses — subjects her body to pushing and prodding. Adding to the atmosphere, the walls feature a series of naked women's butts and a fleshy, writhing tongue that emerges from a hole.

The people in Rottenberg's movies communicate mostly through shared tasks, not words. Finding themselves in the same factory or confined space, they try to make the best of it, despite the strange and seemingly Sisyphean exercise at hand.

For her videos, Rottenberg frequently hires atypical women — including those who are unusually tall, overweight, or muscled — to portray characters who push themselves to extremes for compensation (or, as she says, women who "sell their bodies or use their body as a way to make a living"). In *Squeeze*, the blush source (the blond woman, dressed in an alluring outfit) is literally squeezed by walls for profit. Meanwhile, a nozzle from the wall of bare asses sprays water, and an obese woman spins on a circular floor — all to ensure that the priceless block of lettuce-rubber-blush is made to perfection.

"This piece, which is trying to collapse these geographically distant places into one space, is a natural step for me," Rottenberg says. "It's about using your body and being alienated from your body, objectifying your body and using it almost like a factory that can produce stuff. I feel like that's very feminine. I'm interested in how selling one's body can be empowering."

Rottenberg was born in Argentina and raised in Israel, and now lives in New York City. Her work has received international acclaim. In 2006, she won the Cartier Award, which brings an emerging artist of prominence to work and exhibit in London; in 2008, she was invited to New York's Whitney Biennial. Her videos have been collected by the Guggenheim Museum, New York's Museum of Modern Art, and the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo.

Rottenberg takes risks with her art. Sometimes she succeeds, sometimes she fails. For her 2004 film, *Tropical Breeze*, which spotlights two women who make tissues from perspiration, she created a real box of sweat-soaked tissues and listed it for \$500 on eBay. No one bid. For *Squeeze*, she has SFMOMA visitors view the movie in a chamber that requires walking around it first. She wants to ensure that audiences leave with some kind of reaction. "I don't know if film and art can change the world — slowly, maybe," she tells me. "It's about creating consciousness."



Mika Rottenberg, *Squeeze*, 2010
Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery/Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery

In *Squeeze*, worlds — and butts — collide. Through Oct. 3 at SFMOMA, 151 Third St. (at Howard), S.F. \$9-\$18 (free first Tuesday of each month); 357-4000 or www.sfmoma.org.