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The Body Factory Mika Rottenberg in Conversation with Ossian Ward

Mika Rottenberg was presented with the first Cartier Award for her absurd and subversive video installations. Ossian Ward met with the artist in London shortly before the premiere of her work commissioned for the Frieze Art Fair.

Pressed into claustrophobic spaces, women in beige uniforms ceaselessly toil at making dough. They knead it, shape it into rolls, and then lay the sections of dough onto a conveyor belt. A magical component of the production process are the tears that one of the workers is shedding – as an allergic reaction to a bouquet of flowers that the corpulent woman keeps sniffing at. The tears stream down her stout legs and evaporate on a hot tile on the floor; they seem like a catalyst responsible for making the dough rise. The grotesque sequence flickers on the screen - a loop that looks like it's never going to end.

With her video installation *Dough* (2005/06), [Mika Rottenberg](#) has produced an oppressive commentary on capitalism's alienating work conditions: the moonlight job now takes place in a specially designed sweatshop, where the housewives' bodies are turned into machines that actually produce sweat and tears. The artist, who was born in 1976, addresses themes such as economics in the post-industrial age or cultural identity; the female bodies she portrays exist far from social norms. Mika Rottenberg is part of a vital New York scene that is currently attracting a good deal of international attention. Rottenberg's drawings for *Dough* were already on show in the *pa.per.ing* exhibition, which presented paper works by this young generation of artists in the Lobby Gallery at Deutsche Bank New York. At the [Frieze Art Fair](#), the [Cartier Award's](#) first winner will be showing *Chasing Waterfalls: The Rise and Fall of the Amazing Seven Sutherland Sisters (Part 1)* for the first time. At the center of this video work are the [Sutherland Sisters](#) who became human circus attractions due to their extremely long hair.

Ossian Ward: *How did you come up with the claustrophobic production-line structure for your video sculpture "Dough", in which women use their bodies to create bizarre products?*

Mika Rottenberg: It's kind of a machine to measure surplus, as you would measure a calorie or a unit of something. In this case, it measures the women's work in the form of dough. The structure of the factory begins with Raqui at the top, who kneads the dough, and then Kat below, who stretches it. There are two girls under that, Audry and Adona, who divide the dough into units, which then increase in volume with the addition of moisture from Raqui's evaporating tears and oxygen pumped by Kat. A machine then packages the excess created by the rising of the dough.

I just had a show at the [Kunstwerke](#) in Berlin and the installation of the work there was called *Big Dough*, because when you walked in you saw the back of a large, cubic wooden construction, which you had to walk around. You then went through various rooms with low, dropped ceilings to get to the video. In one space, one of the floor tiles was actually a metal hotplate, painted to look like the linoleum, onto which one of the worker's tears, actually drops of water, would evaporate every four seconds. That drove me nuts, as I got quite obsessed with the physics of it while trying not to burn down the whole institution.

How did you dream up the scenario, and why have women doing the work?

I suppose it really was based, somewhat literally, on [Marx's](#) theory of labor and value, but as more of a joke about surplus and product. It's also about this general idea of how much material there is in the world, of having an excess of something.



5 Second Party, 2006, © Mika Rottenberg, Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York



Dough, video stills, 2005/06, ©Mika Rottenberg, Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York



Dough, video still, 2005/06, ©Mika Rottenberg, Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York



Dough, installation view, 2005/06, ©Mika Rottenberg, Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

First of all, I found the girls either through the internet or an ad in the *New York Post* in which I asked for factory workers that were interested in acting. These women all make a living out of their bodies – they even have their own websites – Kat, for instance, is 6 ft. 9 inches tall, although you can't see that in the film. I'm interested in the way these women use their extraordinary features, and so it made sense to put them in that position. The girls actually never met because I had to build all the rooms in my studio. I also made a lot of dough – buckets and buckets of it.

Tell me about the new commission for the Cartier Award at Frieze Art Fair.

It's called *Chasing Waterfalls: The Rise and Fall of the Amazing Seven Sutherland Sisters (Part 1)*. It's about these sisters who were all born in Niagara County and grew up as poor farm girls in Lockport, New York around the turn of the last century. They all had floor-length hair and developed this formula called *Seven Sutherland Sisters Hair Fertilizer*, which was really an anti-baldness product for men, followed by a whole line of products. As some people in Lockport argue, they were also the first supermodels and something of a girl band, performing on Broadway and shaking their hair in *Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show On Earth*. They had displays all over the world, from Canada to Europe, and even hired substitute sisters when they became too busy.

My work is in the form of a movie trailer, although at some point I would like to make it into a full-length film, because nobody knows about the sisters, even in the US, although each of these seven women has her own story.

How did you chance upon this subject?

I'm always looking for people with extraordinary features or ways of using their bodies; while looking for websites connected with extremely long hair, I found this incredible tale that embodies everything I am interested in – the body and the product and all those inventions from the time of the industrial revolution.

Where did you shoot the work?

We shot some of it in Niagara Falls, partly because that's where the sisters were from, and because their hair was often compared to the falls. In fact, in the beginning they collected the mist from the falls themselves to add to the hair fertilizer; later, they had all these employees, and so we shot 50 extras collecting mist from Niagara Falls.

The other part was shot in Florida, where I connected with this "long hair club." I was lucky enough to find seven women with outrageously long hair who already kind of knew each other in this community.

Did they necessarily have to look similar?

No: one is Irish, one is Chinese, but some of them do look like sisters. I made this little cart for one of them, Yueqin Dai, who claims to have the longest hair in the world at about five meters, for her to walk her hair around in, and I am hoping that Lady Grace will be in my booth at Frieze giving hair.

What about the performative element?

I like setting up live situations. Each time these women take their hair down, it's like theater. Also, I am interested in their relationship to their hair, because it's kind of like an alienated possession, especially with Yueqin Dai, for whom it is almost a separate entity. The way they react and relate to each other is great too, because they are supportive and give each other tips. Of course, with seven women there is always going to be some tension.

What do you think of this global art scene, now that you are busy with biennials and shows all over the world?

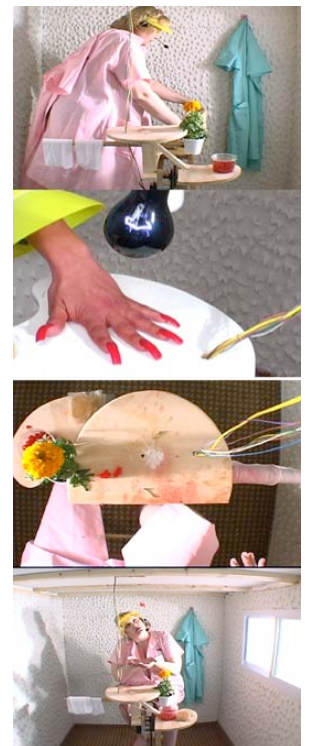
There are always problems, but I was emailing one artist friend of mine who warned me about making small pieces for art fairs – and here I am making work specifically for an art fair! It's different, because my works are in editions – but I love solving these problems, I love working, and I guess I'm a workaholic. I don't know exactly how it affects me, because I'm just doing my job.



Felicia From Tropical Breeze, c-print, 2004,
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Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York



The Seven Sutherland Sisters



Mary's Cherries, video stills, 2003,
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