

Jennifer Vanderpool

2 Installations: Greetings from Sunny Bunny & Mama's Little Helper

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The Sublime Hesitation of Jen Vanderpool

The neo-Surrealist proposition all art is symptom, while referentially false, has a sense that gives meaning to the work of Jen Vanderpool. Her installation works, and particularly her video performances, entwine the markers of symptom, sublimity and radical excess so inexorably that the emasculating, vocalised woman of élite Marxist feminist discourse is refreshingly absent. This brings about a curious arts political disruption. By errantly interjecting a mood of chronic hesitancy, self-destructive obsessiveness and other stereotypes of feminine fallibility into her work, Vanderpool discards the feminist straight-jacket of the obligatory, politicised empowering vocalisation of women and returns the feminine subject to a place of power once lost – the mystery of mutable feminine subalternity - the post-feminist investigation of which, is long overdue.

If her symptom is a diacritical sign of difference, then her symptom is a visible marker of that, which is always in excess of normative discourse. The symptom is the visible edge of sublimity. It is the only articulable part of a story, which may otherwise never be told. Vanderpool's story is interwoven with a wacky ontology, but most importantly it is one, which is located at the edges of uncompromising difference. Here lies Vanderpool's power: her willingness to articulate the feminine symptom as a post-feminist intervention. She removes the symptom from the high moral ground of élite feminist discourse and relocates it in a place of radical anteriority – that is, in a place and a time before the élite markers of difference are able to unstick themselves from the dense viscosity of radical otherness and assume the mantel of self-knowledge.

In her split-screen video performance “Please Take Small Bites” (2003, 17 min. 30 sec.) Vanderpool presents the viewer with two stereotypical women: the self-destructive hysterical obsessive-compulsive woman with excessive taste, and on the other hand, a feminine spirit in nature. On the right side Vanderpool is seen eating her way through three hundred expensive petit-four marzipan candies by taking one small bite from each before discarding them. On the left side of the screen she is seen in a pastoral setting sitting in the long grass of high summer, hesitantly touching each blade. She is almost hidden from view by the tall dry growth. The work also connotes two other female stereotypes: an absent neglectful actual mother who substitutes extravagance for real affection; and secondly, the devastatingly inclusive M/other nature. The two different mothers entail two different female responses. The first is a self-destructive plea for attention mixed with the resentful and punishing mind-set that if affection has never been received it will never be given. The second shows a hesitant female spirit withdrawn into a state of shielded invisibility, which one suspects is for her, reiterated in the infinite divisibility of the details of nature. Vanderpool appears to be completely absorbed.

However, the current mixed-media installations “Mama’s Little Helper” (2006) and “Greetings From Sunny Bunny!” (2006) present the viewer with another story. The installations constitute an extraordinary mix of the psychological markers of hesitancy and excess with an uncompromising pastiche of regional referentialism. The exhibition is an expansive gesticulation of formal elements, often involving the infantilization of materials, including brightly coloured Crayola Mold Magic used by pre-schoolers. Comparatively sophisticated nodes of audio-visual technology punctuate the playschool mood. The work restates the psychological issues of Vanderpool’s earlier work, especially the performance pieces. More importantly however, Vanderpool partially conceals any literal psycho-social content, by mixing it thoroughly into dominating pastiche of regional referents (Vanderpool lives in LA). However, it is from this mix that Vanderpool extracts an anxious narrative.

In “Mother’s Little Helper”, yard upon yard of brightly coloured industrial-strength gaffer-tape cover three of the exhibition’s four walls. Despite the industry required to install it, the tape will be brutally removed when the exhibition closes. It is an interesting strategic end story marking the most hysterical of regional events – the cosmetic brutalisation of the surface of the female body through harsh cutaneous procedures, such as caustic facial peels, aggressive cosmetic scrubs and genital body waxing. Any post-traumatic effects of such procedures, whether physical or psychological, are often covered over by the application of brightly coloured make-up.

A closer reading of the work however, uncovers an unexpected mythology. It is a story of the mystery of vapid desert spirits drifting on warm currents of air, of fallen angels and failed domestic goddesses. “Mama’s Little Helper” narrates the story of a longing to feel the joy and affection of maternal bonding, but it is really a story of the failure of dreams and of life’s disappointments. A final pathetic sadness is implied by the title – that is for many women, emotional closure is only temporarily realised through the intervention of cheap over-the-counter pharmaceuticals. But here lies the sublimity. A subaltern voice, no matter how pathetic and mutable it may appear to élite discourse, can tell a story whose meaning passes well beyond the normative intensions of self-awareness.

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