



80 MODERN PAINTERS APRIL 2016 BLOUINARTINFO.COM

Ericka Beckman,
Nectar, 1999-2015,
film still, 10mm/HD,
colour, sound, dual
screen installation,
22 mins

FRACTURING THE FAIRYTALE

FILMS BY ERICKA BECKMAN AND
MARIANNA SIMNETT, TWO ARTISTS OF
DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, ARE THE
SUBJECTS OF CONCURRENT SOLO
EXHIBITIONS AT LONDON'S
ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION

BY ANYA HARRISON

© THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND. PHOTOGRAPHY: ERICKA BECKMAN

“Fairytales imagine possibilities of transformation,” wrote Marina Warner in a newspaper article several years ago, explaining and framing the rise in popularity of the fairytale genre across popular culture. By its very nature, the fairytale presupposes a certain set of conventions — in relation to morality, to gender relations, to identity — which are subsumed into the wider social fabric, but which it is just as apt to distort and thwart. This duality — the ability to build and follow an ordered structure, and then to turn it in onto itself — has made it into the films of both Ericka Beckman and Marianna Simnett, who are the subjects of two concurrent solo exhibitions at London’s Zabludowicz Collection, on view through July 8. Two artists of different generations, their bodies of work share a sensibility about utilizing the narrative, magical structure of the fairytale and the tropes inherent to it — such as music, the role of women and a suspension of disbelief — to push against ingrained behaviors and codified states of normativity.

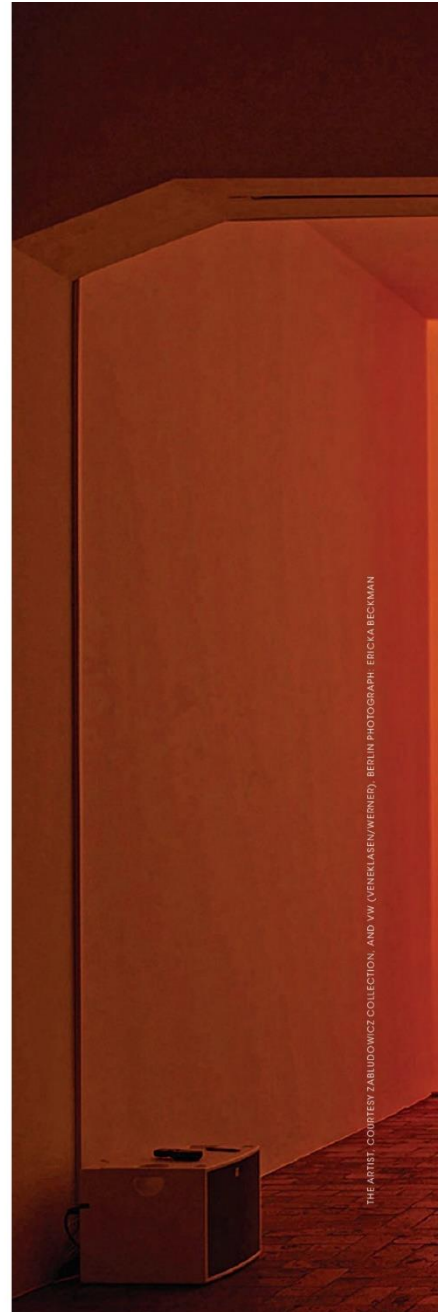
“The main reason why I use fairytales is because they were written to teach people,” Ericka Beckman offered as a common denominator to the trio of films — “Cinderella” (1986), “Hiatus”

(1999/2015) and “Switch Center” (2003) — that make up her exhibition. She was sitting in one of the galleries where Cinderella’s giant glitter-encrusted hearth had been erected earlier that afternoon as part of an artist workshop led by Beckman. “The three films are really made to promote a change in action, in direction, in thinking, and to hopefully promote a behavioral shift,” she said. “Together, they deal with female identity, role play and stereotypes.”

Understanding how behavioral codes are learned, and the intersection between gaming, technology, labor, capital and bodies, are key to Beckman’s practice. She first emerged as a filmmaker in the mid-1970s, associated with the Pictures Generation and CalArts (where she studied), and many of her earliest works, including “Cinderella,” feature a number of her contemporaries: Ashley Bickerton, Mike Kelley and Matt Mullican are just a few names that have appeared in the roll-call of end credits.

In “Cinderella,” the ubiquitous story is upgraded to an interactive narrative game where the titular character is constantly propelled between hearth and castle, encouraged to attain a higher score (dance with the prince, kiss the prince, leave behind her glass shoe) in order to move on to the next level. However, Cinderella does not play by the

“The three films are really made to promote a change in action, in direction, in thinking, and to hopefully promote a behavioral shift. Together, they deal with female identity, role play and stereotypes,” said Beckman



THE ARTIST, COURTESY ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION, AND VW VENERARE/WIENER, BERLIN PHOTOGRAPH, ERICKA BECKMAN

Erica Beckman,
"Switch Center," 2002
Film still, 16mm/HD,
colour, sound, 12 mins





rules. She tears off her dress (whose corset increasingly grows to become a stifling web) and takes ownership of her own journey, refusing the role of an objectified pawn in a story that privileges the male subject and gaze. In Beckman's own words, she wanted "to draw a parallel between ideas about post-industrialization and post-modernism that were floating around in the mid-1980s, that valued the copy over the original, and tie them to questions of identity." She added, "I thought that I could easily overlay the history of industrialization on to that of a woman pursuing her own identity and trying to negotiate where she is within that concept. She is forced to

play this game but has no identification with it. However she's not a rebel but just trying to find a simple path."

Similarly, "Hiatus" flits back and forth between a female protagonist, Madi, and her virtual double, Wanda, in an online interactive game where the player's control of her own journey — and, therefore, identity — is momentarily usurped by a blue-faced cyber cowboy villain bent on dominating her terrain. The only way for Madi/Wanda to escape the game scenario is to bypass taught models and, instead, rely on organic thinking and intuitive thought processes.

Control, the act of relinquishing

and reclaiming it, makes an appearance in Marianna Simnett's highly theatrical filmic set pieces. If Beckman's analogue works — with their DIY aesthetic, multiple exposures, neon colors and framing devices — share a genealogy and cool, cerebral tone with Structuralist filmmaking, Simnett has a far more emotional appeal. Guttural, even. Her film trilogy — "The Udder," "The Blood" and "Blue Roses" — also borrows the structure of fairytales to assess questions of identity and agency but, in Simnett's hands, the result is visually and psychologically more visceral. For "The Udder," for example, Simnett chose the cow's mammary gland as a site from which

Marianna Simnett, "The Blood," 2015, single channel HD video with sound, 26:15 mins (looped)

COURTESY THE ARTIST, ZABUDOWICZ COLLECTION, AND SEVENTEEN GALLERY, LONDON

Given the intense emotions that Simnett's work produces — and there have been instances of audience members fainting while watching or listening to her work — music is “a comfort from the rest of the film”

to discuss gender and “abstract it from a classical feminine model of reproduction,” she explained in an interview, “to give it autonomy and a voice.” Cue close-up shots of cows' udders, some being milked; others, infected with mastitis, being spliced upon.

The word “horror” made a number of appearances during the interview, often linked to the fracturing of bodies and the anthropomorphosis that are a mainstay of Simnett's work to date. “Blue Roses,” for one, is based on “a body horror tale” in which the artist's leg, victim of varicose veins, begets a life of its own as intestine-like protuberances appear and spread with uncharacteristic speed under the skin. At one point, the whole joint throbs with tension, then explodes. It sounds fitting for a B-horror movie, but the effect is sufficiently nauseating, not least in “Faint with Light,” 2016, a light installation and audio, in which Simnett repeatedly hyperventilates to the point of losing consciousness. The groan that she emits at the point of collapse and total loss of control is “an internal, involuntary, alien sound... and expulsion that we don't even know we have.”

Simnett admitted to having an interest in “these invisible horror zones” — the back of a leg, the inside of a nose — that permeate her work and act as “portals” to other worlds, registers and levels of awareness of one's own body and self. In “The Blood,” the main protagonist, Isabel, has the turbinate bones in her nose surgically removed. The unwanted bones reappear as Isabel's school friends, who mock and taunt her, and gnaw on a giant *papier mâché* nose that serves as a window into another world, that of Lali — an Albanian sworn virgin — who has

renounced her biological identity and tempts Isabel to join her. Throughout these films, there's a strong sense that Simnett is working through different notions of morality, of what is deemed socially acceptable, and, as she explained, “the fairytale lends itself well to this exploration and testing, as you've got villains, heroes and archetypes.”

This may also explain why both Beckman and Simnett consistently interweave music and singing into their films. “Cinderella” is a faux musical while “You the Better,” 1983, arguably Beckman's most well known piece, uses a sing-song chorus that steers the players in the film and serves as explanatory guide to us as viewers. Beckman said that she probably wouldn't have made films had she not been able to work simultaneously with music, as “the sound component is a way of doing the narration and instruction, which actually trains you how to watch the film by listening to it.” For Simnett, the musical component provides heightened theatrics and opportunity for “an interjection.” Given the intense emotions that her work produces — and there have been instances of audience members fainting while watching or listening to her work — music is “a comfort from the rest of the film,” she said. “You can relax into a number,” she added, “You can just watch it for entertainment's sake and then return to the horror of the situation. It's a way of synthesis, or bringing together unusual, fragmented ideas or things that don't necessarily cohere neatly, like legs and cockroaches.” MP