

Marianna Simnett

SEVENTEEN | NEW YORK

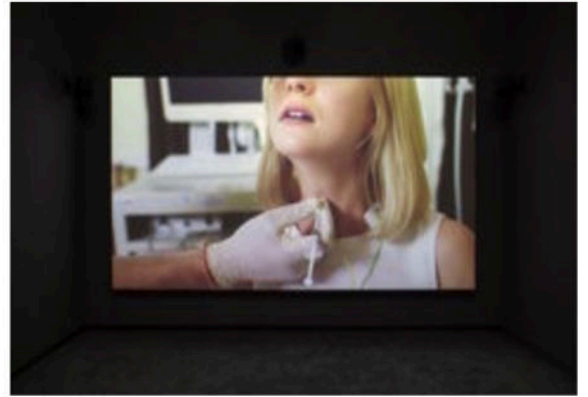
214 Bowery

November 23, 2016–January 22, 2017

My punishment for being a voluble child, overflowing with words and song that grew louder and angrier as I reached adolescence, is a voice slightly down-pitched by small vocal nodules. They were discovered at fourteen, when I—a natural soprano—had trouble hitting my highest notes. “It’s like a boy’s voice cracking,” a vocal teacher joked, to my great embarrassment. I was diagnosed through an uncomfortable laryngoscopy. Once inserted up the nose and down the throat, the scope makes it impossible to breathe normally, let alone vocalize.

Marianna Simnett’s exhibition “Lies,” exploring the gendered implications of voice and masochism, vividly evoked this memory of asphyxiation. In *Faint with Light* (all works cited, 2016), a stack of ultrabright LEDs is synced with an audio recording of Simnett trying to faint by hyperventilating. The intensity of her breath is registered by the lights, which illuminate fully with her deepest inhalations—taken before losing consciousness—and then go dark. Although the strobe-like installation made me queasy, it’s hard to ignore its erotic implications—with *la petite mort* being a euphemism for orgasm. Simnett’s video *The Needle and the Larynx* shows the artist undergoing a temporary lowering of her voice through a Botox injection to her cricothyroid muscle. Slowed to one-quarter speed, the procedure is hypnotic, excruciating. With her large blue eyes directed skyward during the examination, Simnett is much like Renée Jeanne Falconetti as Joan of Arc in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 silent film about the young saint.

The Needle and the Larynx begins with an empowering parable of a little girl forcing a doctor to lower her voice by summoning the natural forces of heat. At the end, Simnett speaks in a startlingly feeble voice two days after her injection. Rather than masculine strength, the procedure relaxed her throat so much that she couldn’t breathe. “You suddenly become conscious of all the parts of your throat,” she says, gasping for air. “They didn’t tell me that I was gonna be so we . . . weakened by it.”



Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 15 minutes, 17 seconds.

— Wendy Vogel