

MAITREYI MAHESHWARI  
Breached bodies

MARIANNA  
SIMNETT

The Girl in a white dress with sparkly blue slippers, part curious Alice, part questing Dorothy, with shades of a Hitchcock blonde, creeps through the sealed halls of a pharmaceutical facility. It manufactures poison that it sells as a transformative present; a *gift*, in both its linguistic translations, that preserves youth or accelerates its end. Upon entering that hallowed space, so close to the denied substance she desires, The Girl disappears. In the continuous loop of British artist Marianna Simnett's 2017 film installation, *Worst Gift*, The Girl becomes at once the toxic substance and its consumer, accursing demands to receive the same treatment as the boys: an injection that will thrust their voices into manhood and the power that comes with it.

Simnett's films draw upon the storytelling tropes of fairy tales in which a childlike innocence is met with an appetite for cruel fantasy, and a transgressive relation to the body. Her characters—children at the brink of adolescence, pubescents on the threshold of adulthood, sworn virgins, bionic cockroaches—all exist in in-between states, defying categorization, becoming a threat, as Julia Kristeva suggests, to the “identity, system, order”<sup>1</sup> of the patriarchal social structures that govern us. Her fables unfold from multiple, occasionally impossible perspectives, personifying internal organs, vessels and inanimate elements, that penetrate our perception of solidity, and lay bare the anxiety that arises when our fluidity cannot be contained.

Despite our intimacy with them, our bodies remain largely unknown to us, and a confrontation with its stray fluids—blood, vomit, sweat, pus, urine, shit, semen—defines, according to Kristeva, “the border of my condition as a living being... As in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me*, what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.”<sup>2</sup> As such we gain a peculiar, life-affirming pleasure in experiencing things that horrify us. It is on this threshold that Simnett's work lives; its presentation of the body is both monstrous and clinical. Unembellished depictions of medical procedures undergone by the artist herself become a means of breaching sterility, creating narratives around the physical and symbolic presence of bodily functions and effluence. Like a good horror movie, her works almost force the viewer to look away, feeling these transformative acts viscerally against our own selves.

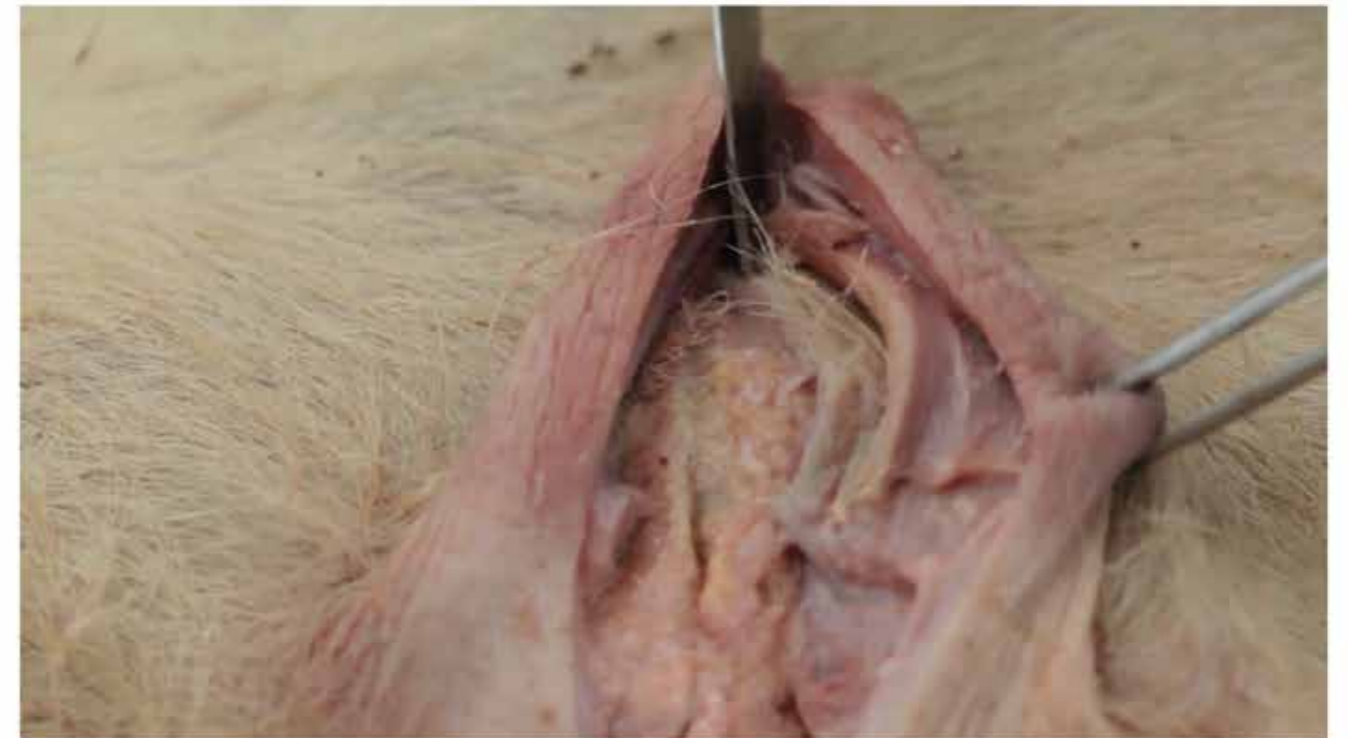
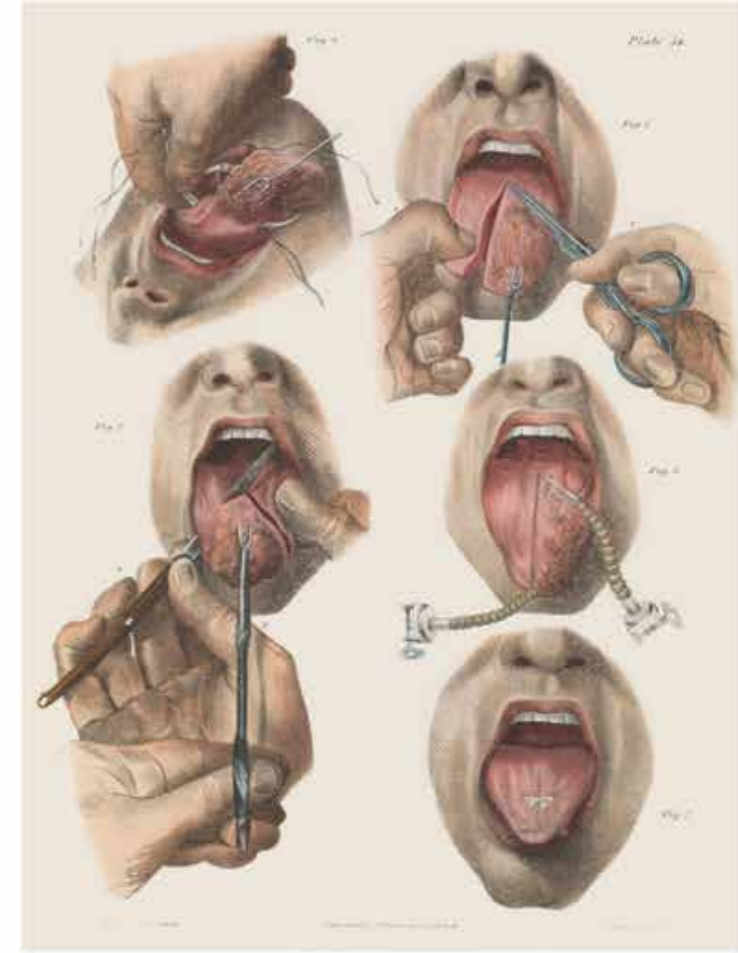
The ambiguity of the abject makes it a source of revulsion and desire. By witnessing that which we find morbid or fearful, we purge ourselves emotionally. Sound and music are deployed to cathartic effect throughout her films, often as musical numbers she has written elaborating on the film's themes. Playful melodies belie vengeful sentiments in which bodily actions become metaphors for social relationships: “Without us you're just a cavity/ A sack of depravity/ An empty snout.”<sup>3</sup> Sung by the children, untrained actors and professionals who play heightened versions of themselves in her works, these songs lend an air of innocence and lightness to storytelling that seeks to understand the human condition by looking at that which we reject from it.

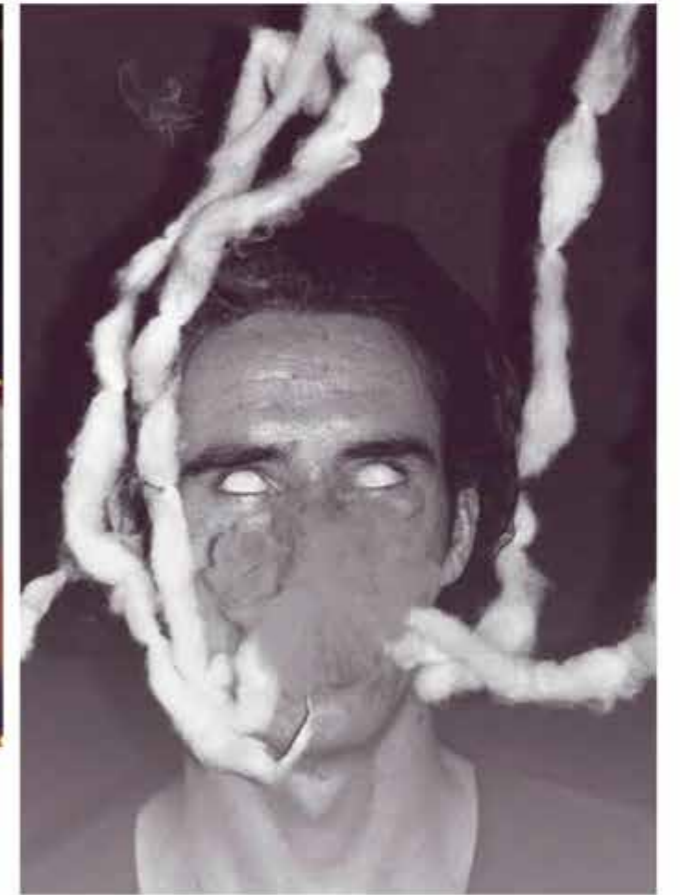
Simnett's 2016 work *Faint with Light*, takes her transgression of the corporeal yet further, challenging the border between the living and the dead. Closing her airway and hyperventilating, as she induces her body to faint repeatedly, the ‘I’ of her subjectivity is unbearably expelled from her momentarily lifeless body. The sounds of her breathing, collapsing and then rasping for air, invade our senses, taking over the mind, and in a perverse act of empathy, we start to mirror them, breath catching, faltering. The work startles; a wall of lights rising and falling in intensity with her respiration leaves little escape as each cycle of fainting creates its own moment of abjection and then catharsis, as we hear, to our own relief, Simnett revive.

1. J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p. 4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3. Lyrics from Marianna Simnett's *Blood*, 2015.

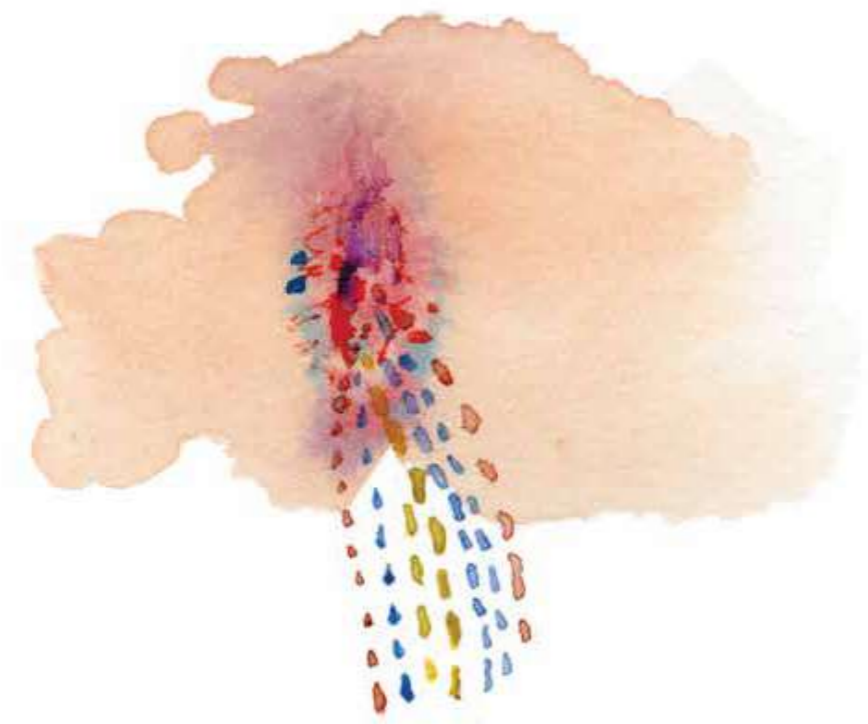












Spoils, 2017  
Watercolour on paper  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett

Operation for Cancer of the Tongue, 1846  
Surgical illustration  
Joseph Pancoast

The Udder, 2014  
Video still  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett and Jerwood/  
FVU Awards

Blood transfusion experiment on dogs, 17th  
century  
Photo: Wellcome Images/Wikimedia Com-  
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Carrie, 1976  
Film still

The Poltergeist, 1979  
Mike Kelley

Linda Blair having make-up applied by Dick  
Smith for The Exorcist (1973)

Phossy jaw, 19th century  
Archival drawing  
Mutter, via Gizmodo

Worst Gift, 2017  
Video still  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett and Matt's Gal-  
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Blood, 2015  
Video still  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett and Jerwood/  
FVU Awards

Vertigo, 1958  
Film still

Blood, 2015  
Video still  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett and Jerwood/  
FVU Awards

Faint with Light, 2016 (documentation)  
Simnett fainting at Factory UK 23.12.15  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett  
Photo: Emily Rudge

Faint with Light, 2016 (documentation)  
Sound waves of four consecutive faints  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett

Worst Gift, 2017 [6 x images]  
Video still  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett and Matt's Gal-  
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Wheatfield — A Confrontation: Battery Park  
Landfill, Downtown Manhattan — With Ag-  
nes Denes Standing in the Field, 1982  
Commissioned by Public Art Fund, New  
York. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks +  
Projects, New York.  
Photo: John McGrail

Rainbow, 2017  
Watercolour on paper  
Courtesy Marianna Simnett