

this is tomorrow

Contemporary Art Magazine

FACT, 88 Wood Street, Liverpool, L1 4DQ

Ericka Beckman & Marianna Simnett



Title : Marianna Simnett films (Blood and The Udder)

Website : <https://www.fact.co.uk/event/beckman-simnett>

Credit : (c) Marianna Simnett, Jerwood/FVU Awards

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FACT

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Review by Samantha Browne

Ericka Beckman and Marianna Simnett show the human female to be a rebellious creature, a feisty character, courageously challenging the dogma and stereotypical norms of her world. However, they do this in very contrasting ways and herein lies the intrinsic value of this exhibition.

Beckman's first film 'Cinderella' (1986) echoes the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system of folklore narratives, which classifies the famous fairy tale of the same name as 'Persecuted Heroine'. The protagonist plays the 'Cinderella Game', which involves being "projected back and forth like a ping-pong ball between the hearth and the castle." However, be prepared to be surprised if you know the children's fable. Victory for Beckman's lead character follows a completely different path, albeit no less liberating or blissful.

The non-linear narrative is told in musical form but sometimes it is difficult to understand the lyrics because of the combination of the audio quality and room acoustics. Nonetheless, the strength of this video work lies in its imagery and sense of immersion into a virtual world.

'Hiatus' (1999/2015) is a dual screen piece which underlines the themes explored in 'Cinderella', but with a stronger American identity. A young woman plays the virtual reality (VR) game 'Hiatus,' in which she takes on the form of a Go-Go cowgirl called WANDA (urban slang for sex goddess) against a Texan Stetson-wearing character named WANG (urban slang for penis). Beckman explains, "She must learn how to use the power of her 'organic memory' to block his expansion and preserve her freedom." The conquest doesn't fail to amuse.

Beckman studied VR at NASA's Ames Research Centre in 1991, but though a pioneering technological concept, the game's sexuality is arguably what makes her a futurist. Today, porn is the driving force behind VR's development. In 2018 for example, three of the top five VR websites were pornographic. Notably, the film was partly funded by the now defunct American Experimental Television Centre (1969-2011), which gave Beckman access to artist-orientated software. This help is unquestionably reflected in a more sophisticated production.

Upstairs in gallery two, Simnett's work provides a distinctly physical challenge, as the warning notices to those of a nervous disposition testify.

'The Udder' (2014) is an allegorical story in which the udder's recounting of its tribulations with mastitis is paralleled with female virtue and moral corruption. The contradictory notion of a chaste udder brings into focus the human female form as a sexual metaphor. In the same room one can view 'Blood' (2015) which explores the Albanian burrnesha, a belief system that allows women to live as men if they promise to renounce their sexuality. In these two films Simnett provides a fascinating exploration into the perception of female virginity and pangender symbolism, which is

exploration into the perception of female virginity and pangender symbolism, which is as enlightening as it is provocative.

Winner of the Jerwood/FVU Awards in 2015, Simnett received full production support as a result and this is reflected in the quality of her films. Subtitles are used at certain points for clarification or interpretation purposes. However, it seems regrettable that they are not used throughout, as this would have provided for a more inclusive audience.

Headphones are provided to watch the films and these undeniably help as the two large screens are positioned at right angles to one another, which can make it difficult to focus one's attention. Added to this, one can hear Simnett's irregular panting coming from the next room in 'Faint with Light' (2016).

It takes physical resilience to watch 'Faint with Light' (2016), a 12 metre wall of ultra-bright strip lights that rise and fall in sync with Simnett's self-inducing cycle of faints. Endurance notwithstanding, the driving force of human curiosity compels you to seek more information about this piece in order to process what you have encountered. The discovery that Simnett was inspired by the life of her Croatian grandfather, who survived a mass execution during World War Two when he fainted in front of a firing line, seems to imbue the work with an ethereal halo. Arguably, it is only when this knowledge is acquired that one really appreciates the resonance of this piece.

The curatorial selection of these works in this adaptation from the 2018 exhibitions by the Zabudowicz Collection is to be commended. Their juxtaposition provides a stark contrast in environment, culture and epoch, which serves to amplify Beckman and Simnett's thought-provoking perspectives on gender, identity and equality.

Whether you are engaged, inspired, confronted or affronted by what you see, the experience of this exhibition is undeniably memorable.