

## CLOSE UP: IN ANOTHER VEIN

Mira Dayal on Marianna Simnett's *Blood In My Milk*, 2018



Stills from Marianna Simnett's *Blood In My Milk*, 2018, five-channel HD video, color, sound, 73 minutes.

A KNIFE PUNCTURES FLESH. The blade enters a nasal passageway, and the camera shakes with every cut. Tweezers penetrate the frame and tug out a lump of bloody tissue and bone. “Nothing to worry about,” the surgeon says. Quivering atop a piece of medical gauze, the extracted substance resembles a slug, or a sliver of tongue. “Who are you?” the young patient asks, frowning. “We are your inferior turbinates,” the lump replies, now personified by a pair of adolescents wrapped in pink sleeping bags. Thus begins the young patient’s nightmare, starring a giant papier-mâché nose—a proxy for her own. As she dreams that the teens are chewing on its oversize nostrils, her nose begins to bleed. The image is a vision of the body attacking itself, of the undesired parts returning to haunt it, like phantom limbs.

Marianna Simnett’s *Blood In My Milk*, 2018, weaves four of the artist’s works to date—*The Udder*, 2014; *Blood*, 2015; *Blue Roses*, 2015; and *Worst Gift*, 2017—into a single, expansive five-channel film that resists linear narrative. The piece cycles through hallucinatory scenes of children’s games, cows being milked, several surgical operations, conversations about disease prevention, the fabrication of a robotic cockroach, a visit to a factory, and other fearful ordeals. At times, the story is propelled by the voice of young Isabel, the central character, played by Isabel Maclaren, or by conversations between

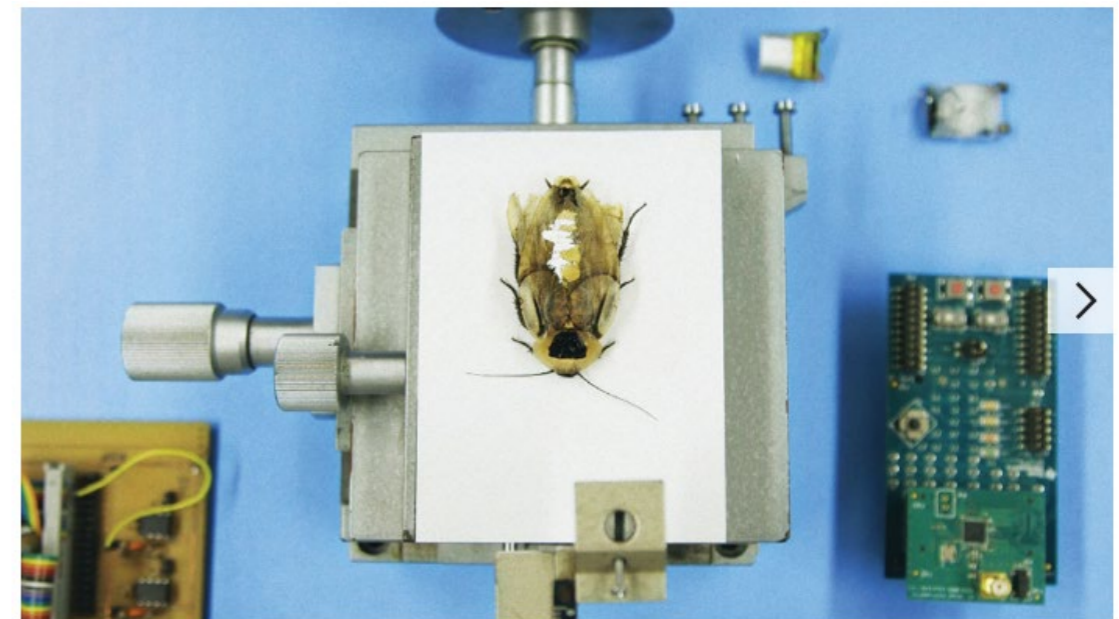
her farm’s herdsman and her mother or her brothers, all of whom fear what might happen if she is left alone or plays outside in the empty pasture. In other sections, the story is interrupted by musical numbers written by Simnett that are sometimes quiet, sung softly by Isabel, and at other times are gratuitous, unfolding over several minutes into a kaleidoscopic sequence of special effects. But most captivating are Simnett’s dreamlike images—of a worm wriggling out of a mouth, of the aforementioned

cockroach crawling up a naked leg—enhanced via quick cuts through associative footage showing bodies, body doubles, bodily materials, and laboratory experiments.



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The film might have been made in the spirit of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” (1986), an essay on the value of crafting stories that gather and transport themes and narratives rather than pursue a single heroic (masculine) line of conflict. Le Guin’s bag is not only a metaphor for form, but also an object that’s been culturally coded as feminine, a “carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle.” These associations are pertinent to Simnett’s own fiction, for here her primary protagonists are in fact the surgical bags, udders, breasts, mouths, noses, cups, and medical vials seen as potential carriers of conflict, cures, or disease. Their antagonist is the scalpel, always threatening to intrude. But the film itself is moved forward by the human agents who carry these objects from place to place—a hospital, a dairy farm, a laboratory, a red, womb-like room.



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This structure produces an enticing sense of confusion without resolution. Simnett composes fanciful narratives, employing leaps of logic (perhaps the consequence of alloying older footage) while creating intentional slippages among her characters' identities, genders, and physiognomies. Her fairy tale also reflects contemporary theories of the body and disease. Think Donna Haraway (by way of Paul B. Preciado): "The twenty-first-century body is a technoliving system, the result of an irreversible implosion of modern binaries (female/male, animal/human, nature/culture)." For example, throughout the film's first half, Isabel's body is conflated with a cow's; the herdsman transfers his fear of bovine mastitis onto the young girl, who sings about her mammary gland becoming inflamed. Scenes of cow-milking (a process that is facilitated by a machine whose many tubes are each latched onto a teat) are edited to reach masturbatory climaxes. In one, footage of the tubes is intercut with that of two brothers sipping milkshakes through straws and blowing bubbles loudly into their glasses; provoked by his older sibling, the younger spits his drink in his brother's face: The action replays throughout the narrative. In another, a teat is massaged and squeezed until its milk spurts out. Toward the end—the second half of the film starkly contrasts with the first, becoming much less cohesive and centering around an entirely different set of characters—Simnett breaks into a pharmaceutical factory in pursuit of a voice-lowering serum, which is usually reserved for use on young boys. (This "cure" figured in two previous works, *The Needle and the Larynx*, 2016, and *Worst Gift*, 2017.)



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Simnett's appearance in *Blood In My Milk* comes as no surprise, since the artist often subjects her own body to the uncomfortable procedures performed in her work. As she explained in a recent conversation with curator Maitreyi Maheshwari, she does this not only to satisfy a "masochistic impulse" but to "seek or make apparent the impossible gulf between my pain and someone else's pain, or my lack of pain and someone else's pain, my imagination of what that pain was." Her visceral imagery is not intended to be merely sensational entertainment; rather, Simnett is interested in both the representation and the embodiment of empathy, trauma, and catharsis. The fairy tale—a genre historically highlighting subjects such as sleep, violence, transformation, and magic—is one register in which Simnett explores her themes. But she has also created far more minimal narratives, as in *Faint with Light*, 2016, an installation comprising an audio recording of the artist hyperventilating until she faints and a stack of LED light bars that rise and fall to this soundtrack, filling the space with overwhelming strobed light.



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That sense of unease recurs in *Blood In My Milk*, most strongly during the scenes of extractions—of a bloodied bone, an imploding vein, a cow's milk. The removal of matter from the body abstracts it, making it simultaneously transfixing and repulsive. It is no longer part of a functioning, internal system, but is isolated as an estranged element that may now be independently modified. The viewer's negative physical reaction to these sights signals self-disgust as well as self-defense, a fear of having these procedures performed on their own body. And that may be why Simnett focuses on chastity as a method of self-preservation. Like fainting, chastity is a refusal to participate, a vow to remain unto oneself. As Isabel's sibling recites, in the third person, "The older brother explains to his sweaty compatriot that no tool [not even a knife] can match the natural power of chastity. I bet you didn't know that."



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"Chastity, chastity, chastity, chastity, give me the strength to abstain," sings Isabel from within the milking factory. A celibate cow will not produce milk; according to the herdsman's logic, preventing infection requires preventing lactation. The emphasis on abstinence is odd, given Simnett's explicit interest in the body's insides, its limits, and the ways it interacts with fluids and machines; it also seems to be countered in the film's second half, during which a patient with varicose veins laments having caused her own affliction by keeping her legs crossed for too long. But chastity may be read as a resistance to being used, harvested, milked. The female body is the storyteller's archetypal carrier, one that may reproduce but that also transmits, remembers, gathers,

contains. Simnett herself is the patient zero of her work; her complex consideration of self-preservation mobilizes feminist concerns without becoming prescriptive. The hypnotizing last sequence of the film, following Simnett's break-in to the factory complex, shows the vocal serum being injected into hundreds of sterilized glass vials that recall so many carriers. Simnett wanders through a darkened section of the factory, where flashing red lights signal malfunction, or perhaps intrusion. She gazes into a workstation's portal, a void into which a hand might be thrust to mix volatile chemicals. The camera shifts from behind to within the portal, zooming in on Simnett's widening eye until, like Alice in Wonderland, she tumbles into a fantastical abyss. *Blood In My Milk* may not provide any satisfying resolutions, but it is a clear argument for taking control over the possession, modification, and reimagining of our own bodies.

*"Marianna Simnett: Blood In My Milk" is on view through January 6 at the New Museum, New York, and at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt.*