

Marianna Simnett Fluid States

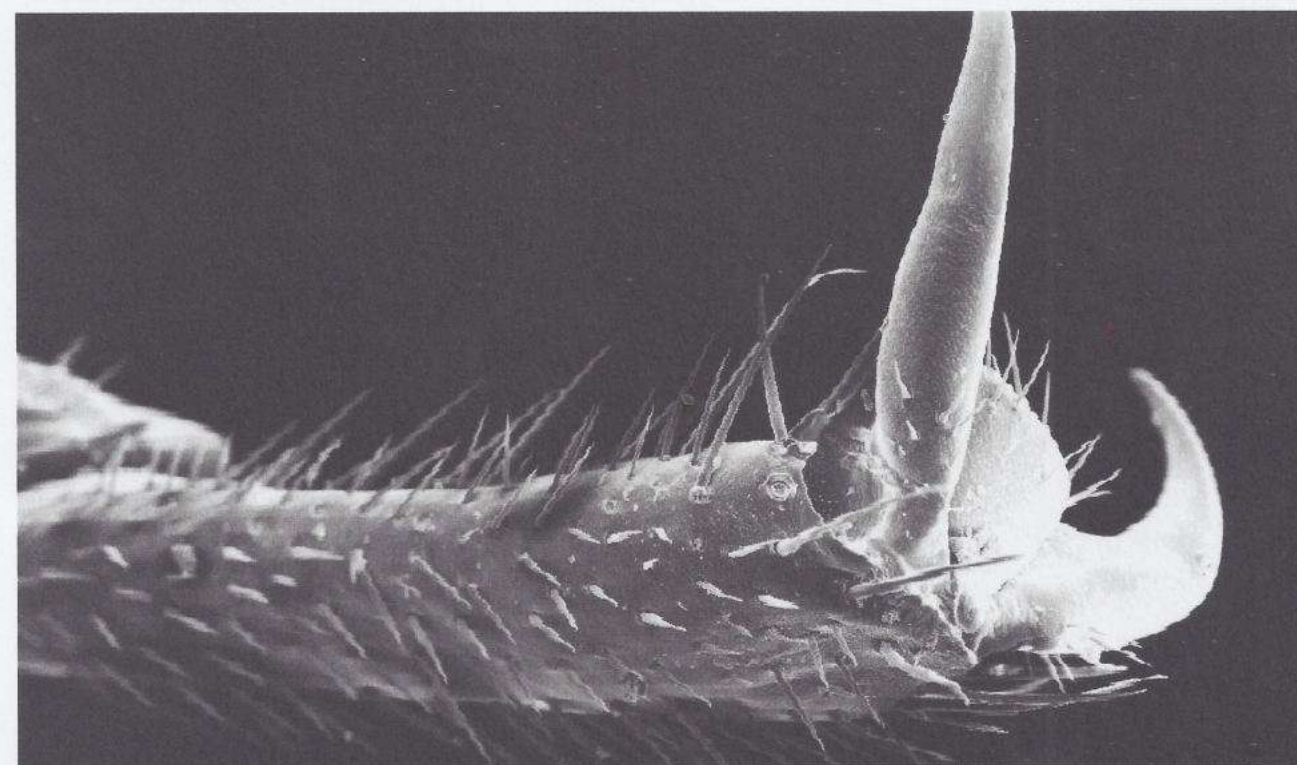
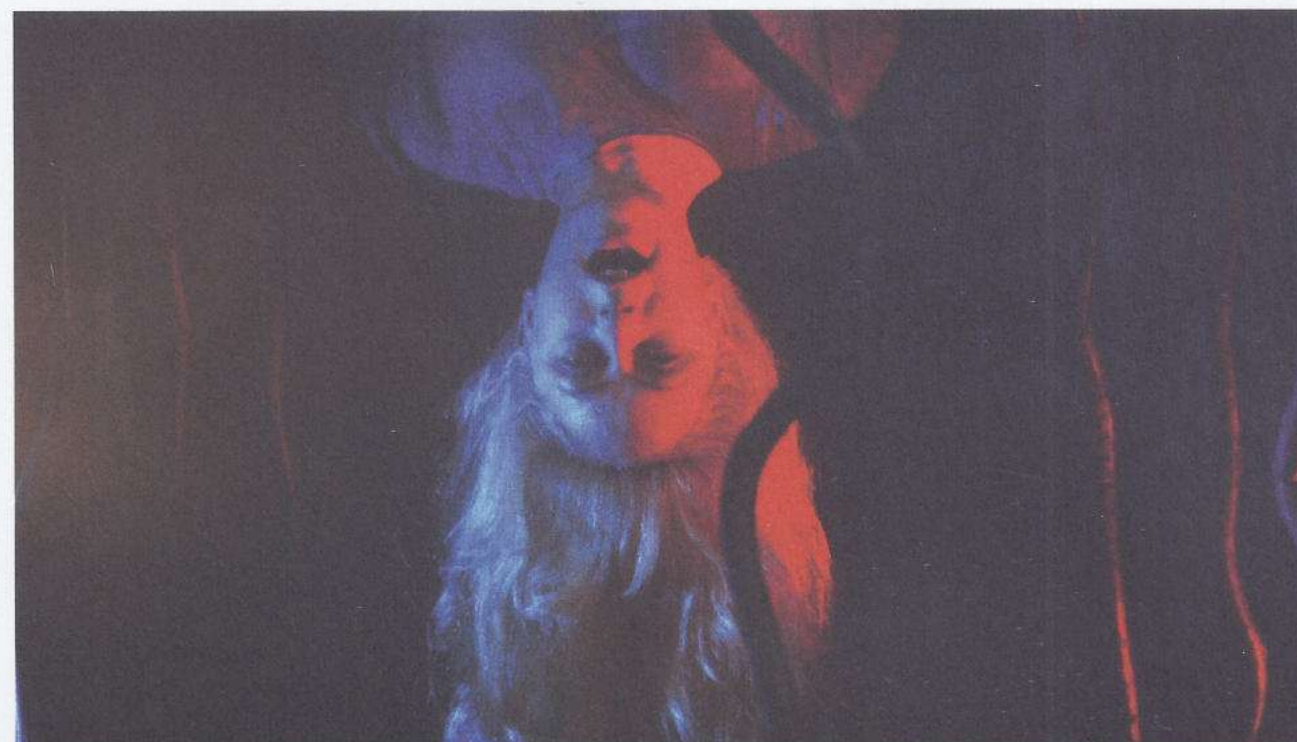
by Sara Cluggish

British artist Marianna Simnett (b. 1986, Kingston-upon-Thames) creates fable-like films and moving image works that examine the sense of intimacy, but also angst-ridden alienation, that we experience with our own bodies. At the New Museum in New York until January 6, 2019, her 5-channel, 73-minute video installation *Blood In My Milk* (2018) probes bodily pathologies and psychological traumas, bringing together four video works produced by the artist over a span of four years.

"MARIANA SIMNETT. BLOOD IN MY MILK," NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK, THROUGH JANUARY 6, 2019.
"MARIANNA SIMNETT," MMK, FRANKFURT, THROUGH JANUARY 6, 2019.

Marianna Simnett,
Blood In My Milk, 2018 (stills).
Courtesy: the artist and Comar.

FEATURES



Marianna Simnett, *Blood In My Milk*, 2018 (stills). Courtesy: the artist and Jerwood/FVU Awards.

SARA CLUGGISH: Congratulations on your solo exhibition at the New Museum, New York, which brings together four moving image works produced over four years – *The Udder* (2014), *Blood* (2015), *Blue Roses* (2015), and *Worst Gift* (2017). You have combined all four films into a 5-channel, 73-minute video installation, which is a new work in its own right. How did you arrive at the decision to title this expanded piece and exhibition *Blood In My Milk*?

MARIANNA SIMNETT: *Blood In My Milk* alludes to a grotesque underbelly or monster we may never see but know is there, lying in wait beneath the surface. Blood showing up in the wrong place is scary. It should be kept inside, away from view. The thought of blood in milk is deeply unsettling because it introduces an alien substance into our bodies, one that we are familiar with but also reject, especially if it is spiking our primary drink of nourishment. This sense of contamination extends to the exhibition itself. All the films bleed into one another, across five screens. They infect each other and merge. The central female protagonists in *Blood In My Milk* get progressively older and change guises in a continuous universe, which draws upon my interest in bodily pathologies and psychological traumas.

For me, *Blood In My Milk* immediately elicits a squeamish reaction not unlike the one a viewer might have when watching your films. All of them center on an examination of body parts and organs, as well as the infections, needles and other medical instruments that invade them. This focus on the body – most often the female body – is often characterized as an attempt to figure out a role for women within or against a medical tradition that has pathologized female behavior. Do you feel this is a fair description of your practice? Is anything missing from this vantage point?

I reject a conformist idea of femininity for myself, not least because in past years I was medicated for an excess of testosterone. But the politics of gender is not the starting point for my work. Sometimes the most glaring parts of my work are ones I make unconsciously. The central characters of my films – which are

either played by myself or by early teenage girls – amp up their womanliness and girliness; they have blonde hair, black lashes, pink bedrooms. Femme as femme can be. I use role-play to enact brutal over-dramatizations of what it means to be a woman, in the hope of melting the borders of these definitions. All my work centers on forms of fluidity, be that a fluid, ambiguously gendered subject or, more literally, fluid processes like the production of milk, the spilling of blood, or a neurotransmission that triggers muscle movement. Liquids slide into one another. Nothing rests in one position for too long. Fluid becomes a metaphor, message or vibration that travels throughout the work.

Because this exhibition brings together all four films for the first time, it offers a rare opportunity to read all your female protagonists alongside each other. What commonalities and differences exist between them?

The installation begins with Isabel, a young girl aged 9, in *The Udder*, who then reappears in *Blood* at age 10 and on the cusp of puberty. She has a bold, coquettish, Lolita quality, and is told by her mother that she is “too beautiful to play outside... being outside could entice the abuser, the corruptor, the abused corrupted in accepted ways.” Isabel escapes this interior, which is presented as a theatrical set that resembles the four-chambered interior of a cow’s udder. She ventures outside in an effort to defy the rules imposed by the adults around her. As a way to gain further agency, she turns to chastity as a weapon, a term she repurposes to defend herself from the oncoming threat of disease. This is portrayed in the context of mastitis, a painful bacterial disease of the udder that prevents the production of milk and is also common in breastfeeding women. Isabel uses a declaration of chastity as a form of defense. She’s not going to be raped if she says she’s not. Her “abuser” appears later as a brightly lipsticked, twin version of herself. As a form of protection, Isabel becomes ugly, takes a knife and cuts off her own nose, stating “now let’s see who’s too beautiful to play outside.” This is a reference to Saint Æbbe of Coldingham who cut off her nose and upper lip so she would not be raped by invading Vikings.

So you equate martyrdom and mischief with that particular age, the rebellious, pubescent period when life seems to be changing and shifts quickly?

Yes, but this becomes dangerous, as in: how far are you going to go?

Up to now, we have been describing *The Udder*, the first work in the filmic quartet, but your rebellious description also rings true for the hero in your most recent film, *Worst Gift*, where you play an older variation of this same female protagonist.

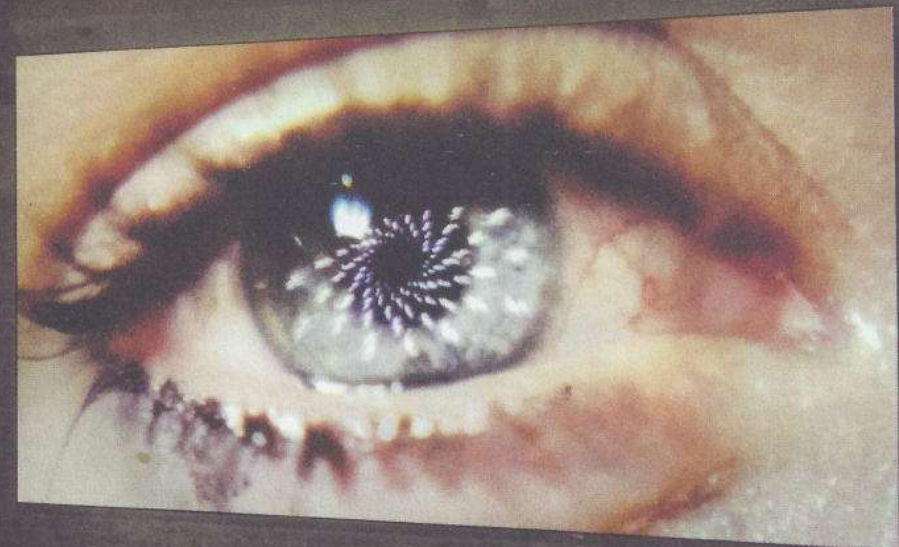
Yes, exactly. The difference being that in *Worst Gift* the character is more complex, in the sense that she transforms from a subordinate role into a sort of witch, able to conjure animals and cast spells on those who wrong her. She shifts from a wandering Dorothy *Wizard of Oz* type character to a zombie in a half-dead state who faints and is resuscitated in a constant cycle of collapse and revival.

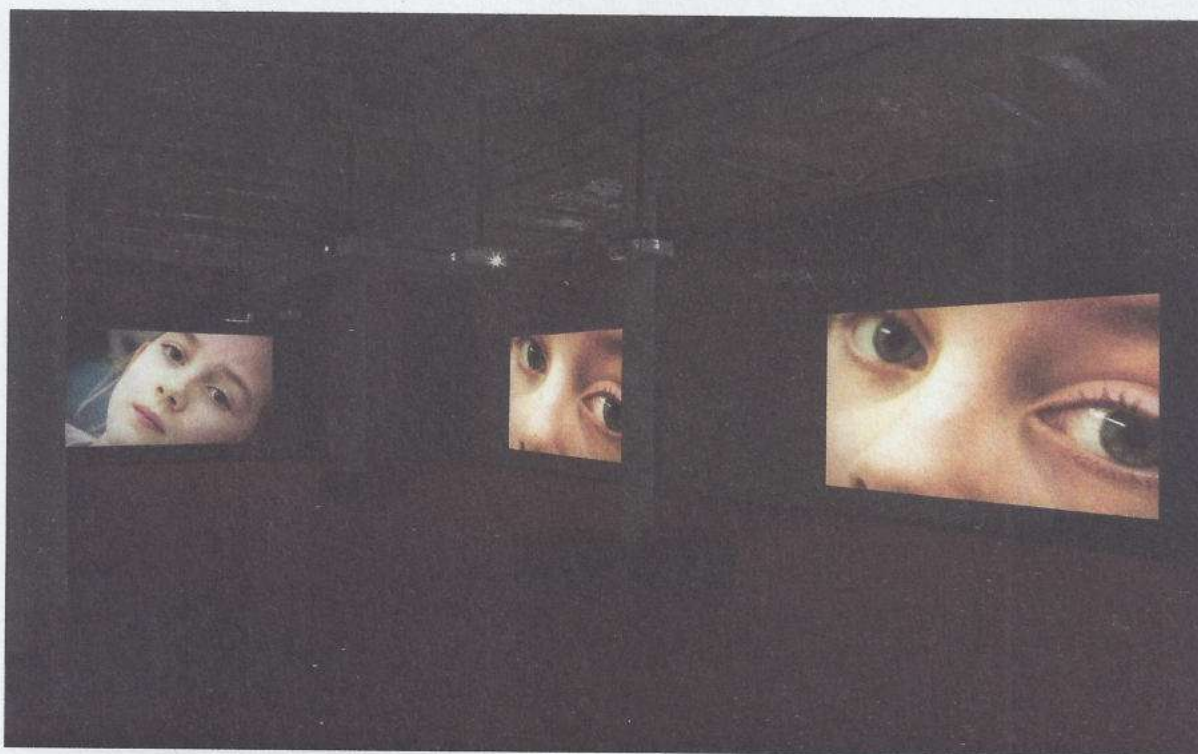
Do your dreams ever influence your work?

I often dream about body parts separating. For some reason, I always imagine bodies as parts rather than whole. *Blue Roses*, for instance, stemmed out of a nightmare that something grotesque was happening behind me – a sensation of veins growing on the back of my knee. I am also interested in notions of inherited illnesses. As a child, I was scolded for thinking my mother’s veins were blue roses. Those bulging blue veins cover the legs of all the women in my family. Varicose veins sit in an interesting place for me medically, because their treatment does not have easily defined boundaries between the necessary and the cosmetic. A slippery line exists between what is considered essential and what is not in Western medicine.

You spoke earlier about breaking down the boundaries between the four films through their re-editing and newly designed installation. Can you describe the exhibition space for our readers?

Visitors enter a reddish carpeted room with five large screens around the perimeter and a 9.1 surround soundtrack, each speaker emitting a unique mix. This means you can walk around the space





Preceding double page and above: "Marianna Simnett: Blood In My Milk," installation view, New Museum, New York, 2018. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio.
Right page: Marianna Simnett, *Blood In My Milk*, 2018 (stills). Courtesy: the artist and Jerwood/FVU Awards.

throughout the 73-minute circuit and have a different listening or viewing experience depending on where you are standing.

And perhaps it is important to note that no one can ever physically view all five screens at once?

Yes, and for me, the loss and fracturing of an experience also expands it. Every single shot has been extended to allow viewers to turn their heads and walk around the room. I want to avoid a sense of panic or the feeling that they have to keep up with an impossible amount of imagery. There is also something to be said for allowing viewers to miss the work, which I find is more representative of the way we interact with images in the world. At the same time, "Blood In My Milk" is peaceful and languid, a place to chill out, more than my moving image work has ever been before. People stay in there for hours. In the past, my editing style has been almost chokingly dense and fast paced. Here, instead, one might just see a factory line of Botox vials circling around on a conveyor belt for a couple of minutes; or a frame of girls sleeping, which starts to mimic the actual reclining bodies watching

screens in the museum. The whole installation becomes much more sculptural. It becomes as much about the room as the content on screen.

You write your own, original music scores. Can you speak about the importance of these soundtracks?

I share many musical references with my close collaborator and musician Lucinda Chua. The sound design and instrumentation are often anatomically tied to the body. We used strings in *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016), a video work which documents a voice surgeon injecting my cricothyroid muscle with Botox, effectively paralyzing this muscle and lowering the pitch of my voice. The strings function like vocal cords and echo the wooziness of the film. In *Blue Roses* the valves of the veiny leg collapse, so we used horns and valvular sounds. *Blood* includes a xylophone which has a boney quality to reference the little girls' turbinate bones. In *The Udder*, the instrumentation follows the chugging, suctioning rhythm of cow milking machines on a robotic dairy farm. The bass line of the machines informs the song. Every facet of the songs and the lyrics are completely connected

to the material. We make decisions because the work is telling us to. We follow the logic of each piece.

Where is your work headed next?

Over the next year, I will be working on a sculpture for a show at Sadie Coles, London, writing the script for a feature-length film, as well as a short film produced by Film and Video Umbrella about sleeplessness and addiction. An unfulfilled project is to collaborate with roboticists on a musical theater piece using artificial intelligence.

Why consider bringing this new technology to the realm of the stage?

Theater is supposed to be for bodies; without bodies there is nothing to do or see! Right now, we are having to rediscover, to deeply reconsider what bodies are and what they mean to us. We are all cyborgs. We are all essentially hybrids and might as well just get over ourselves, face this and revel in it. Dance in the eye of the fire.

Sara Cluggish is the director of FD13 Residency for the Arts, Minneapolis.

