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F L A U N T

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MARIANNA SIMNETT | STATES OF ANXIETY, STATES OF GRACE, STATES OF TRANSITION

BY ALISON GREEN

Ten minutes into Marianna Simnett’s five-channel video installation, “Blood In My Milk,” which seamlessly splices together footage from four of her past video works to create a feature length omnibus opus of sorts, I feel a creeping sense of familiarity, a whisper of déjà vu at the nape of my neck. Five minutes later, I realize: this is what anxiety feels like, splayed out on five screens in vibrant color—absurd and irrational and entirely inescapable, ominous narratives that spiral wildly, endlessly feeding off itself like a snake eating its own tail.

It’s fitting that my body reaches this conclusion before my mind does, given that the body—its mountainous flesh and birdcage of bones, its internal systems and external politics, its endless roiling threat of infection—is the focal point of Simnett’s surreal and unsettling work. She relentlessly plunges into the inner workings of our physical selves (the cavernous tunnels of the nasal passages, the knobby lump of the larynx) with clinical precision and a harrowing, sensory-overloading scrupulousness. Part whimsical fable, part grim morality tale, part fantastical science fiction, the London-based artist uses the body as the medium and the message in her film, light, and sound-based work, constructing fractured and theatrical narratives featuring earnest non-actors (children, farmers, doctors) that flirt with the shaky scaffolding of what’s real and what’s imaginary, flitting unflinchingly between the tender and grotesque.

An electrifying tour de force summation of her work over the past five years, “Blood In My Milk” consists of a single storyline that sprawls dizzily across time and space, interspersed with jarring contradictions and paradoxical images: a cow’s udder infected with mastitis as a metaphor for puberty contaminating a young girl’s virtue; a group of boys in the throes of adolescence getting their vocal chords unnaturally and repeatedly lowered with Botox; a giggling slumber party between three young girls blurring unceremoniously into found medical footage of a live endoscopy.

I do not consider myself a squeamish person (I’ll always remember the awestruck look my college boyfriend gave me after I coaxed a shard of glass out of his leg with my bare hands), but Simnett’s incisive work traps you in a frenzied and heightened state: your pulse is racing and your skin is crawling and you are cripplingly aware of the delicate bones in your nose and the highways of veins on the backs of your knees. Her work has always been rooted in the physical, an ongoing investigation into our squishy organs, circuitous systems, and slow spreading infections. Yet she also confronts the tenuous yet undeniable thread between the physiological and the psychological, the way our minds and bodies simultaneously work together and wreak havoc on one another.

Two earlier works, “Faint with Light” and “The Needle and the Larynx,” find her using her own body as an instrument, forcing her body to undergo unnatural transformations in order to probe the outer limits of her medium. In “Faint with Light,” a pulsing light display flashes rhythmically in tandem with audio of Simnett’s ragged breathing as she hyperventilates until she induces unconsciousness. It’s an intimate and arresting experience, nearly erotic in its breathlessness, ending with a guttural sound (you feel it in the pit of your stomach) erupting from somewhere deep within her body as she loses consciousness and crumples to the floor. “The Needle and the Larynx” slips similarly between soothing and jarring, as a singsongy parable about gender roles plays over slow, steady footage of Simnett getting an injection of Botox in her larynx that temporarily paralyzes her vocal chords and lowers the tenor of her voice. The moment the needle finally penetrates her neck is excruciating, especially coupled with audio of her gasping attempts to speak after the injection. But, as with all of her work, Simnett does not dilute or detract or allow you to look away, which is what makes it so gutting and so powerful.

I spoke with the fascinating artist about the inspiration behind “Blood In My Milk,” how her work is an attempt to grapple with the anxious state we’re all living in, and why she feels fainting or vomiting is “the best gift” she can get from a viewer.

Your newest piece, “Blood In My Milk,” which is currently up at the New Museum in New York and is about to open at MMK in Frankfurt, sees you adapting your past video work into a multi-channel video installation. What inspired this?

I have spent the last four or five years working through a number of themes and working with similar characters, from surgeons to children to insects, across different bodily states. I went from “The Udder” to “Blood” to “Blue Roses,” moving through bodily digestive systems and organs of the body. Next was “Worst Gift,” which is much more about insidious substances and looking at Botox and what gets put into our bodies rather than what bodies are made of. Then, suddenly, everything started to bleed together. It just felt like the right moment to go back to the drawing board, so I revisited every single thing I had done since 2014 and made this epic work out of everything. It was a deliberate attempt to create an epic summation, which will now allow me to start a whole new body of work.

I was impressed at how seamlessly all these narratives flowed together.

It’s a universe, really. It goes through a lot of internal psychological spaces and psychological traumas. A lot of the narrative jumps are part of the fragmentary nature of the work itself. There’s a lot of fucked up dark stuff, but there’s also a lot of song and dance and joy, and it skips cavalierly through those moods, which is very erratic and spiky in nature, and very me.

There’s this lurking sense of the absurd in the piece, like in magical realism or science fiction, when you transport us inside a nose or an udder. It’s constantly pushing us away and pulling us back in at the same time.

It does that with the camera movements as well, going from pastoral landscapes and then diving right into your nostril or into your gut or digestive system. I’m trying to get closer than close. I have a forensic scrutiny about storytelling and that requires an acute observation of my subjects as well as pushing the limits of the camera. There’s a genuine sense of wonder that I have as a maker that carries me into these worlds in the first place.

With “The Needle and the Larynx,” and with another piece from 2016, “Faint with Light,” you’re turning your examination of the body back onto yourself. The medium is the message. What compelled you to involve yourself in the work to this extreme degree?

What’s funny about those two works is that they relate more to art, like sculpture or painting or film, in the sense that they are pushing a medium to its outer limits, and that medium is me. In some of my more

theatrical pieces, there’s a clear division between stepping onstage and off. In “The Needle and the Larynx” and “Faint with Light,” there is no exterior to the work. It’s a document and it’s a fiction but there really is no stepping outside of it, for me or the viewer.

Faint with Light” was inspired by my late grandfather, who was shot at during the Holocaust and survived by fainting at the same time. The bullet was meant for him but he collapsed so they took him for dead. When I was doing my MA, I started to make work about the gap between my story and my grandfather’s, and in order to do that, I had to make myself faint. It was emulating a gesture that was not mine, but really undergoing it. There’s a sense of absolutism to everything I do. There is no compromise.

This attempt to meet someone on a level I couldn’t grasp ultimately developed into “Faint with Light,” which is less of an autobiographical story and more about this very peculiar sound that I discovered I made when unconscious and the total lack of control I experienced. I wanted to create an inverted experience, which meant blinding the viewer at the same time. My body became the instrument through which I could tell a story that wasn’t even necessarily mine, but that demonstrated a form of sincerity, although it feels embarrassing to say that. It’s not self-harm. (laughs)

The journey that you take the viewer on is a turbulent one, full of contradicting ideas and jarring imagery. What impact are you hoping that this cognitive dissonance has on the viewer? What is your work aiming to say about the human psyche or the human experience?

That’s the big question, isn’t it? I like to destabilize people, and that often returns to questions of identity and trying to shake up and wake up people into not growing up too rigidly and too set and too boring. I think it’s really crucial that people travel to those spaces that are uncomfortable and acknowledge them, because there’s so much smoothing over and pretending everything’s fine and living in denial.

I would ask that people question themselves in relation to others. That they don’t just stroll along with their babies and aspirations, avoiding the realization that it’s not that glossy. That’s why my work is so volcanic—I’m constantly trying to unsettle things. But that’s instinctive. I don’t think my work has a grand message. It’s taken years to figure out what I’m trying to say because I was scared of it and how it reflected back on me at first, but more and more I’ve grown confident in my language and now I feel like it protects me.

Your work seems centered on anxieties and ailments, and the relationship between the physiological and the psychological—how they work together and wreak havoc on each other simultaneously. It reminds me of this Anne Carson quote that has always stuck with me: “But to talk of mind and body begs the question.” Is your work about the body? The mind? Do they exist separately?

I don’t know if I’m just getting older, but our mental states are changing. I think it has a lot to do with screen culture and addiction because there’s a gradual threatening move towards lethargy with our bodies, as our brains, conversely, are becoming more rapid and developing different techniques for receiving information.

I talk a lot about technology not being this great evil because I definitely don’t think that, but there is a loneliness. It gives us a very contradictory relationship ^[1]to proximity and distance. I like to make work that is cautionary but still has glee and optimism. I would never make work that’s like, “Oh god, we’re all doomed and we’re all going to die. Climate change and technology are going to overwhelm humankind.” It could very well be the case, but I want to make work that is in the eye of the storm, reveling and dancing in the fire of it.

There seems to be a lot of thematic discourse in your work about chastity and virtue, especially in regards to the transition between girlhood and womanhood. Was this focus intentional?

It’s quite autobiographical. I wasn’t allowed outside as a child. My mum was scared because she thought I was too “beautiful” to play outside, which is a line I use in “Blood In My Milk” to mock my childhood a bit.

The characters are all non-actors. After researching five or six farms for “The Udder”, I landed on this wonderful family that were willing to take part in the film, and gradually my story grew around them, although I already had my themes locked in. I knew I wanted the threat of mastitis and the juxtaposition of disease and purity.

My work is more situated in a bisexual or trans or multi-specied argument, which is why I kind of resist a total feminist take on my work. Not because women don’t have more to fight for—they do—I just think it’s going to end up in a disaster if we only fight for women. I think we need to cross-contaminate a little more.

Can you tell me a little bit about your creative process and what drives it?

It’s different each time. Each one tells me what to do next. It’s like following a guide. There’s always a flow giving me clues as to what to do next. “The Udder,” which I consider my first full work, came after a piece called “Dog,” in which I asked an old woman to be my dog in a dog training class. I was starting to think a lot about empathy—my work is often about empathetic relationships and almost always about control or lack of control. I was thinking about why we get compelled by large blue eyes in Hollywood films or why we like looking at dogs or cats on the Internet. I hate that kind of relationship to imagery. I hate images that we’re conditioned to get emotional over, so I tried to stop using those images, and work with an udder as a protagonist because it doesn’t have a face. (laughs)

So when you choose to focus on a certain procedure like Botox in the vocal cords, or diseases like mastitis, what holds your interest? Is it just something that sticks in your brain and you can’t get it out?

I couldn’t get Botox out of my head. It’s the blood of capitalism, this invisible bacteria that travels through everyone’s body for various and often vain reasons, and it’s just so powerful. I’m inspired by transformation and anything that can transform from one state to another. Botox can cause botulism, food poisoning, or be highly fatal if ingested or absorbed into your system before it turns into Botox as we know it. I research it and I meet scientists. Everyone is so suspicious of me—I just turn up as this enthusiastic artist wanting to come to all the conferences at Oxford. It’s like the witches in Roald Dahl, just halls full of neurologists and medical people. But I knock on the door until they let me in. Similarly, with “The Needle and the Larynx,” I knew I wanted to make a fiction about boys but I wanted to undergo the procedure myself because I didn’t think I could speak from a place of sincerity without doing it. Same with the endoscopy in “Blood In My Milk”—I just plunge my way in.

I remember reading that 2 or 3 people fainted watching “Blood In My Milk.” I went into this interview wondering if your intent was to provoke, but it doesn’t seem like that’s what you’re trying to do. You’re not going into it trying to make people faint or vomit.

No. I’m just very thorough. I don’t really do anything else except for this in my life. My life is my work. I don’t know where the limits are in this world. Don’t get me wrong, fainting and vomiting is the best gift I could ever get back from a viewer. If a body is responding that way, then I’m triggering their neurons and sweat pores. They’re not thinking about how to feel, they’re just feeling.

The emphasis on working with children adds this notion ^[1]of innocence and childlike wonder to your work. There’s an absurdity there that only exists in a child’s mind. Childhood is also both thrilling and terrifying.

Children can be very cruel creatures and are under the most threat today. I think there’s fear about our future and legacy as people who have damaged our earth. There’s something cynical and sad about it. All the children in my work are sad or being mean to each other.

I'm also obsessed with puberty, because I just think that age ^[SEP]is so oozy and weird and uncomfortable—being in that body at that time is probably the most uncomfortable you'll ever ^[SEP]be because your body is going through those high-speed changes. I like talking about bodies undergoing something and that is the classic rite of passage before you get to adulthood. Transformation is inherent, yet also there's a sense of possibility—you've still got the chance to change avenues at that point.

Do you consider yourself a hypochondriac?

No. (laughs) I used to pride myself on not having a theme, but I realized I was denying my own psychology, which was changing, and my relationship to my work was getting very violent and aggressive. I was sickening myself through working. I was unconscious of the fact that my work was even about illness and sickness. Yet all the while I was getting quite sick myself. There was a lot going on subconsciously.

What's on the horizon for you? What's percolating?

I'm making a short film about bird behavior. I kept homing pigeons last year. I would like to make something about sleep and capitalism, and what would happen if we removed our need to sleep. They're studying white-crested sparrow's brains to figure out how they are able to go without sleep, and then trying to implement their findings for soldiers in the battlefield. It's bleak.

I was drawn to your work because it emulated the experience of anxiety in a way that was true and gutting, yet life-affirming. I wish I could see it in person.

I'm really happy that communicates. I'm on medication and I'm totally open and public about it, but there were times it was intolerable living inside my body.

I wish you could too! I've never been to Los Angeles but I've always wanted to visit.

You should! There's a ton of anxiety and Botox here. You would love it.

Delicious!