



Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx* (2016), installation view.
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Photo credit: Gregory Carideo.

SYRINGES AND MOSQUITOES

Marianna Simnett, *The Needle and the Larynx*
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While a yellow plastic box marked “DANGER: SHARPS WASTE ONLY” takes center frame, two latex clad hands prepare a syringe. We are in a medical facility. Rudimentary pizzicato tones set up a fairy tale-style opening, delivered in a soothing English-accented female voice: “One time, the Girl went to the surgeon and said . . .” In a different voice, high-pitched as if modulated by helium inhalation, the aforementioned Girl begs ‘the Surgeon’ to make her voice low “so that it trembles with the earth . . .” The Girl’s language is appropriately characterized by a rudimentary grammar, while her imagery evokes magic realism. Now a third voice enters, the somehow unnaturally low voice of the Surgeon, who denies the Girl’s request with the pronouncement “Girls must be high and boys must be low.” The three voices, the Storyteller/Narrator, the Girl, and the Surgeon, are all similar in accent, rhythm, and intonation, notwithstanding their respective pitches. This correspondence, one soon realizes, is indeed the very heart and pulse of the work. Meanwhile, events unfold at a meticulously slow speed, offering a meditative quality to the images as the gloved hands, presumably the hands of the Surgeon, continue to charge the syringe with an ominous-looking fluid. The fairy tale continues in the middle range Narrator’s voice, now linking more directly with the images on screen. She describes the Surgeon’s tools and their functions as if they were the devices of an alchemist, “sharp knives, powders, liquids, miracles,” but “the yellow container with ‘danger — destroy by incineration’” is “an irrevocable invitation.”

The three distinctly pitched voices create a discourse, though not always with each other, overlaying an antagonistic sound environment described as “the groans outside.” The subjects discussed include a description of a sadistic punishment the Girl imagines inflicting on the Surgeon, which involves the summoning a horde of mosquitoes to “suck him dry,” and just as we hear about the insects’ probosces puncturing the Surgeon’s skin, the syringe

appears to be ready. A second subject is a detailed history of the cosmetic enhancement medication Botox and its derivation from Botulism, the disease named in the 19th century, that causes “the throat to seize up”, among other horrible symptoms. And finally, in a third line of dialogue, the Narrator explains, in medical terms, that Botox paralyzes muscles, and, if it is injected correctly through the neck into the right part of the cricothyroid muscle, the pitch of the patient’s voice will descend.

Three voices, two transformed by technologies, three characters, three acts in one continuous take, with deliberate pacing and cinematography, work up a classic, almost cliché Hitchcockian denouement, until the score (Purcell’s “Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary,” famously used in the opening scene of Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange*) is violently interrupted. The needle of the syringe eases into Marianna Simnett’s delicate throat, like a mosquito’s stinger, dancing in and out of the meat of the perfect neck for five unbearably long minutes, one third of the film’s duration. One is immediately repulsed. It is not easy to watch. Some viewers leave.

A library of sound weaves in and out of the interaction between the Surgeon, whose task is to mutate a gender-identifier, and Marianna Simnett, the epitome of her gender’s contemporary aesthetic canon. Hers is an unsullied, symmetrical visage balanced on an elegant swan-like neck, with perfectly groomed blond hair falling around a sculptured jaw-line. Yet, problematizing this very paradigm of female beauty, she has usurped what is often seen as ‘natural privilege’ by commissioning a procedure that is not necessary, detaching it from its gender transition function for the sake of art. However, the paralysis of her cricothyroid muscle is expected to reverse itself. Her voice will return to its normal pitch after a few weeks, as we learn from the surgeon’s explanation to his patient (in his actual voice) on the soundtrack.

The Needle and the Larynx is not an installation in any architectural sense. It is a performance recorded as a single-

channel moving image work, adamantly dependent on the values, tools and temporal structures of advanced 21st century digital film production. The gallery viewing space is therefore somewhat irrelevant. This piece is made for the kinds of venue where traditional films screen.

The deluge of femininity that floods the work (perhaps a challenge to traditional feminism) is realized through the technological arsenal at this artist’s disposal, and contrasts with the performative action of the procedure. Simnett’s porcelain neck, her muted but precise makeup, and her gaze up at the surgeon together speak a conceit of gender. These elements render her not helpless but inert, pulling on the strings of male privilege and sexuality. After all, she commissioned the procedure. But the contradictions inherent to the work are the sources of its power. It is within the procedures of medical practice, as a set of consumable products, that her body finds autonomy.

Simnett’s purchase of surgical and cinematic procedures as materials for her art work, first as performance, then as cinema, enunciates gender, elucidating and criticizing qualities that traditionally determine gender distinctions without denying elements strongly associated with femininity. Her own beauty, here ostensibly self-sacrificed, iconoclastically rejects its power in a heteronormative labor paradigm that indentures the body. The inescapable statement of *The Needle and the Larynx* is an assertion of volition and somatic self-realization. Surpassing a reiteration of the critique of traditional gender oppositions, Simnett’s artistic practice undermines the binary taxonomy of male-female using original, radical methodologies. *The Needle and the Larynx* invites the viewer to consider the larger performative apparatuses, determined by social constructs, which actuate distinctions inherent to our ideology: antagonisms in the guise of affirmations of identity.

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