

## Marianna Simnett

MATT'S GALLERY



Marianna Simnett, *Worst Gift*, 2017, LEDs, liquid, medical syringes, vials, video (color, sound, 18 minutes). Installation view. Photo: Jonathan Bassett.

Marianna Simnett's film installation *Worst Gift*, 2017, is a *Wizard of Oz* for the Botox age. Simnett worked with physician and singer Declan Costello to tell the story of a voice surgeon who injects prepubescent boys with a substance to lower their voices, creating a surreal fairy-tale musical that is part hallucinatory daydream, part nightmare. Shot in a field, a Botox factory, and an operating theater, the film stars the artist herself as a Dorothyesque character—wearing a girly white dress and turquoise sparkling slippers—who is on a journey to be transformed via the same substance.

The film begins with Costello—his face augmented with bulbous sores—singing an introduction and filling a syringe. Boys sit on chairs in a hallway wearing dirtied hospital gowns, their faces greasy with sweat. "Sometimes they sound mad. And very often it takes years seeing psychoanalysts, specialists, acupuncturists, before they realize their condition," the surgeon intones. One boy dangles a mouse in front of another. The group chants, "Squeak!" as the second boy cowers on his knees. They grab him and lift him onto a surgical bed. The surgeon enters singing and injects the boy in the throat. Once he has injected all the boys—shot in silhouette through a screen—the camera cuts to Simnett sitting on the surgical bed, looking coyly up at the surgeon. The surgeon says: "No, I'm sorry. I'm afraid this procedure's for male patients only." This refusal segues into a full musical number starring Simnett: "Take a little bit of girl / Dress her like a sick rose / Add some tears to her eyes / Make her cry for a dose."

*Worst Gift* is filled with references to its 1939 source. As the boys chant in unison on-screen about the science of rainbow formation and the metaphorical pot of gold, lights hanging from needles on the gallery ceiling flash through the spectrum. Later on, thunder cracks, rain pours, the screen goes black. Simnett walks through a storm at night. As the sun rises, she enters a wheat field through a shorn path, echoing Dorothy's Kansas. A factory looms on the horizon, creating an image akin to Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, 1982—two acres of wheat planted in downtown Manhattan. Simnett's industry-nature juxtaposition is possibly real, but it likely was created in postproduction. As the factory gatekeeper refuses her entry, Simnett makes choking sounds and a worm crawls out of her pursed lips, to the sound of birds twittering and cawing. The gate then magically rises to allow Simnett to stride through the industrial surrounds of the factory in her sparkly slippers, like Dorothy marching through the green halls to find the Wizard.

*The Wizard of Oz* follows Dorothy and her companions on a quest to fulfill their wishes. Simnett is on a similar mission. But her search for a substance to make her voice sound more stereotypically male also positions gender as a kind of sickness. Yet *The Wizard of Oz* is a hopeful film. What it suggests, and what Simnett's film reiterates, is that altering perception can be more powerful than altering physical matter. Things can be fixed, problems can be solved, people can be changed, dreams can come true, if you can just alter the way you see them. Although used medically to treat voice conditions such as laryngeal dystonia, Botox is more often employed to suspend a face in time, to stop it moving through the expressions of life, to correct what people imagine to be the problem of aging. Which is, like the Lion's lack of courage, or the fairy-tale medical condition Simnett has envisioned, a matter of perception.

—Kathy Noble