



CENTRE STAGE

The Udder and Blood by Marianna Simnett, who says: "I have to get very close to experiences that other people might want to be more removed from."

The nose has it

American filmmaker Ericka Beckman and London artist Marianna Simnett join forces for a new exhibition in Liverpool using technology and the classic tropes of fairy tale to explore free will. **Deborah Mulhearn** writes

"Clothing can't make you a man," says the young protagonist of *Blood*, one of two philosophically – and physically – probing films by Marianna Simnett, part of a duo of artists whose work is on display at Fact, Liverpool.

The rich and layered work of Ericka Beckman and Simnett investigates female experience and the extent of free will. Gender roles are questioned, and lines and limits of all kinds are blurred and transgressed as females (not necessarily human) are cornered, corralled, caged and reshaped to suit and service others.

Three late 20th century videos by the American artist Beckman recreate the language and architecture of the early days of gaming and virtual reality, whereas viewers encounter the sensuous cinematic range of British artist Simnett's much more recent work.

Both artists explicitly and implicitly reference fairy tales, with their focus on women's bodies and sexuality that has to be punished and controlled (or allowed to be controlled). Females are constrained and constricted in various ways, by clothing,

societal and sexual expectations, the dilemmas of choice, by misunderstanding how the "real" world works, and by mechanical and medical procedures or cultural traditions that could yet perversely offer a means of escape.

Simnett's two films, *Udder and Blood*, follow Izzy, a young girl who disobeys a parental injunction not to go outside. She enters a familiar world that is now hard to read. The titles suggest newly apprehended extremes. Are her brothers protecting or pursuing her? Is the herdsman friend or foe? She has part of her naval cavity removed, an operation that was thought to cure women of menstrual and genital problems. She meets a sworn virgin – a woman who has not only eschewed sex but also decided to live as a man. It's not easy viewing.

"My work is about our physical selves, our bodies – though not necessarily the human body," she says. "It's bringing attention to the fact that we are made out of stuff, we are not in the air, so the here and now of being in the room, in a collective space with the work, is important to me."

In Beckman's 1986 film *Cinderella*, the

eponymous character is stuck in the frames of a computer game, moving ceaselessly between ballroom and kitchen. In *Hiatus*, a female avatar is hectored (and lassoed) by a day-glo blue Texan cowboy as the "real" woman who is playing the game experiences her fear.

Simnett's work also explores the games and role-playing that girls and women choose or are pressured into. *Faint with Light* is a large metal and light installation in a separate room where she has translated the sound of her hyperventilating into bars of light that swell and fade as she gasps and grows faint, like a monstrous lung capacity test.

"You don't see the process, and it's an abstract sound that could be a saw, or someone running in a park," she says. "But most people would sense that it's distressed human breath. In order to make my art I have to get very close to experiences that other people might want to be more removed from."

All these works are shown on loops, and because the viewer enters at any point in the story cycle, the sense of repetition and randomness is intensified in what are essentially never-ending quests, as the characters try to remove or change aspects of themselves. The unsettling sense is that they are also ultimately desperate attempts at disappearing acts.

Ericka Beckman and Marianna Simnett is at Fact, Liverpool until 16 June