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Aïda Ruilova at Walter Phillips Gallery

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Aïda Ruilova's projections and short videos allow an access to intimate and haptic spaces where bodies are compressed into startling rhythms that are both slapstick and sensual. Repeated images and phrases alongside the physical acts of bodies transfer action upon other objects, spaces, and sound, shifting communicative acts into the body-extension phenomena of the cinematic, inviting what writer Vivian Sobchack might call the "skin" of viewing that "is both mine and not my own." [1]

In a projection called "life like", a young dark-haired woman, played by Ruilova, lies in various stages of jarringly-cut grief, giddiness, hopefulness, nausea, boredom, and desperation upon an unresponsive body of an old man, played by French filmmaker Jean Rollin. Ruilova caresses and smothers Rollin's face with both hands, shifting between a silent wait for a heartbeat, towards a slow posture of unresolved seduction, cut between scenes used from Rollin's own films wherein various creeping young women ascend staircases with candelabra, stand torch-like in doorways, and disappear into crypt-like spaces. Ruilova has filmed herself in similar settings of rock-strewn beach and listless interiors, inserting herself within the slick procession of vampiric sirens. In contrast to Rollins' ritualistic icons, the dead interiors surrounding Ruilova and Rollins evoke sadness and neglect, with cold grey light, sagging wallpaper, and close-ups of a shag rug resembling congealed red rice. It seems more and more suggestive that the gothic actresses' emergence and submergence within crevices and trap-doors attempt to replace and reanimate Ruilova's failed seduction of Rollin. A scene wherein Ruilova is leafing through a photo-play of Rollin's films

becomes an alternative forced act wherein an unseen set of hands grabs Ruilova's fingers and jerks them across an open page in a motion of simulated and furious writing.

In an untitled work from 2003, a woman lies upon a rocky beach while the motions of the sea move back and forth as if being rewound and replayed by a hidden remote-control. Each movement is synced with the sound of slow, thick breathing. This use of the unfixed still quality of rewind and playback is repeated in an untitled work from 2002, this time strange enough to shed the heavy-handed atmosphere of the gothic landscape. A collapsed dark-haired woman lies on the edge of a film crane shot so that only the outstretched arm is in view. The crane's arm moves back and forth, again in sync with breathing that is now eerily inward, leading up to a prolonged breath wherein the crane slowly retreats out of shot. As narrative expectation latches onto the intakes and exhales, the feeling is of a soothing, physical, and empathetic resignation. In this way, Ruilova liberates a mere illustration of the film-body of cinematic time by anthropomorphizing the crane's movements, both relocating and stretching filmic presence within the inner solitude of the breathing body.

Ruilova's use of extreme close-up angles and claustrophobic cuts, associating the horror genre in film, ensures that the viewer is already in a state of nervous anticipation. These already-familiar techniques are then compressed in her shorter pieces, wherein utterances such as crying, spitting, screaming, and breathing become immediately of the same body as each interrupted sighting of action. At several points in the video "You're pretty," a record is scraped queasily across a rough surface while a lanky character utters a pathetic cry. The angle at which this scene is shot, that of a cramped retreat across a stone wall, cannot be separated from the character's voice, becoming the wall and texture of his half-sobs. In "Hey," a woman in salmon-orange hisses "hey!" followed by varied combinations of cuts to clacking blue fingernails upon a banister, the frenzied jerk of a pair of legs and pointy-toed shoes up a ladder, the jiggling of the woman's cheap blouse, and a strange searching act of a riding crop prodding unseen pests. A repeated hyperventilated sound resembling the rising squawk of a chicken comedically insinuates motivation behind each jiggle, jerk, and useless prod. This strategy of foreshortening allows an access to the inner filmic reality of the characters' bodies and their utterances.

"Beat & Perv" lays bare the futility of trying to find clarity in the video's repeated code. As each reiteration of the phrase "beat, bah-beat, bah-beat!" gets no closer to crystallization, attempts to define the meaning of each drum-beat and utterance become as exhausted as the character's smeared eyes, dangling hands, and flat squat of bare legs. The underlying humor in Ruilova's videos is most obvious in "Almost", wherein

a young woman in Kohl-black eyes crouches and crawls in shadowy corners while biting her bottom lip and drooling, shaking her fists with cartoony rage. Expressions of fear and suffering made cliché by well-known horror conventions are given no room to breathe here, cut off through interruptions that ridicule the seriousness of such sincere portrayals. A piece called “The Stun” turns this into an act both frozen and stretched, as a man’s cry of alarm becomes forced, his jaw wrenched open by disembodied hands in the shivering hiccups of a scene caught between backward and forward movement, accompanied by the strains and refrains of feedback and stretching leather.

The tension and anxiety in Ruilova’s work has often been interpreted as a self-defeating structure which merely repels and frustrates the viewing experience. While Ruilova’s alien bodies and rough cuts flesh out meaning through repeated viewings, their incompleteness challenges the idea of viewing them using conventional narrative expectations. This provokes what writer Vivian Sobchack calls the viewer’s “body that makes meaning before it makes conscious, reflective thought.” [2] Ruilova’s projections and videos, contrary to the idea of being endless prisons for the characters which inhabit them, are spaces of limitless reiteration and reanimation; both film-loop and endlessly deferred closure make up a suspended, rather than definitive, atmosphere of dread that strengthens Ruilova’s work. Rather than becoming frustrated with anticlimax and its endless loop, there is instead a resigned bliss in the intuition and personal experience of the inner body of viewing.

By Kim Neudorf, 2009

Works cited:

[1] Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *Carnal Thoughts : Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2004. p 66.

[2] Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *Carnal Thoughts : Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2004. p 59.