

For her part, Perret has sought to work through the contradictory demands of aesthetic autonomy on the one side and instrumental utilitarianism on the other. Unlike previous models of avant-garde utopianism, the aim here is to sustain a tension between art and life, not to magically reconnect the two. In this respect, Perret's work could be favorably compared to much of the recent art that comes under the banner of relational aesthetics. However, against the ideology of post-production valorised by relational aesthetics, Perret's insistence on the social use value of her objects takes us back to a moment before the ascendancy of the society of the spectacle.

Jimima Wyman: Whak'ema!

507 rose, Venice, California,
29 April 2006
www.507rose.com

Jimima Wyman's show, *Whak'ema!*, at 507 rose, was the gallery's fourth exhibition: this artist-run space in Venice, CA is still young. While its location is not in one of LA's (many) gallery districts, its proximity to the legendary cultural output of the utopian beach town of Venice gives it a place within an aesthetic history that is rich with possibilities for spin-offs, knock-offs, and, sometimes, one-offs. 507 rose is committed to featuring emerging artists, and the small storefront with its large window is ideal for housing site-specific installations that take into consideration not just the viewers who enter the gallery, but those who pass by in cars and on foot. Wyman's installation did this in spades, as her graphic blanketing of the gallery's interior was highly visible from the street and beyond.

The installation was composed of numerous red and yellow hibiscus-printed fabric squares stitched together, each one with an elasticised hole big enough for a head to poke through. One patchwork of squares stretched across the room, about four feet from the floor, and each of the squares had masks attached which gallery-goers could inhabit. Above that patchworked plane, the walls were covered in the squares too (instead of masks, their holes framed more fabric) creating a room-within-a-room for heads only. During most of the three-hour opening reception, Wyman performed in the installation, moving methodically from mask to mask, singing along to a pre-recorded soundtrack that played from a boom box sitting on the gallery floor.

Wyman's design made good use of the gallery's window as a kind of proscenium, which, along with her commandeering of the entire room, created two distinct vantage points for the audience. Given that the piece was first and foremost concerned with sight's privileged position within an ordering of the senses, a description of the experience of each of the views it proffered is in order. The first view was that of the passive viewer who remained outside the gallery space, never entering to pop his/her head up through one of the masks. This long view showed Wyman and, sometimes, other gallery-goers interacting with the piece. From the sidelines it was clear that the intense visual experience offered to those participating was 'simply' a result of simply crafted fabric panels, and that the immersion was facilitated through the most economic of means (only the head entered the room-within-a-room). The bodies below the plane appeared disconnected, but always with minds of their own. During her performance, Wyman's body was especially lively: as she sang she swayed and tapped, in traditional theatrical fashion. Her body's expressivity seemed to insist that the strictures of vision created by the soft grid and masks could be resisted by the body and, most importantly, that there should be someone there to observe the scuffle.

While its frequent references to modernism link *The Crystal Frontier* to an actual past, the picture of Angkor Wat used to promote its latest incarnation summons up the paradoxical vision of a future that is already in ruins. From the vantage point of this atopic historical juncture, *The Crystal Frontier* emerges not as a nostalgic lament on the failed ambitions of the avant-garde but as a targeted critique of the present, one that compels us to imagine a different future for contemporary art.

Chad Elias

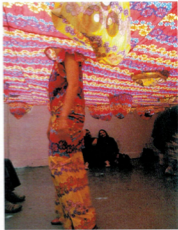


The other view made possible by the piece was, of course, that of the participating viewer, who got to see that the body's role was not only one of resistance, but of implication in the spectacle. Depending on which mask she/he chose, each participant was forced to look in one direction only. Perhaps the direction allowed for a glimpse of someone else in a mask, and there were a few positions from which you could gaze into another's eyes straight on. But often it was not easy to see any action at all. The frustration lasted only as long as it took to dip out of that mask and bob up into the next, but the trial and error and immutable anonymity of the in and out and up and down was not without its effects. However, every mask did offer a view of the fabric panel billowing and undulating as participants entered and exited the plane. As one stood with one's field of vision entirely within the room-within-a-room, the dynamic surface was such only because of the movement of bodies. So while vision was emphasized by the framing of the eyes and sequestering of the head, it was the body that completed the spectacle.

The low-tech drama of *Whak'ema!* was easily comprehensible. Wyman used Hawaiian fabric that at present is decidedly everyday (if it is not found on the body, it is covering car seats and luggage), and her set construction was straightforward from any vantage point. Its meanings are similarly forthright, to the point of apparent elementariness. Because from all angles, the work points to the idea that, if nothing else, our body must be valued because, quite simply, it holds up the head from which our eyes see. This is a 'lesson' that is beyond obvious: it is one none of us are taught, but is something we understand from the day we begin to

note

1. See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2005.



clockwise from top left: all Jimima Wyman, *Whak'ema!* 2006. Digital stills of performance. Courtesy the artist.

walk upright. If there is, indeed, a body of knowledge that we carry in our bodies, this would surely be part of it. Our vision and visions are only as important as the body that allows us to see. *Whak'ema!* did not attempt to construct or reconfigure the body in an idiosyncratic or personalised way, but rather it illustrated how the way we are put together must inform how we prioritise or synthesise our sensory input. In a world where we sometimes do not have a choice about what comes into our line of vision, it is invaluable to remember that the phenomenon of the body is no further away than one glance down.

Anna Mayer