

DONKEY SKIN - HAQ, PASSMORE, ROUSSEAU, TURNBULL



Donkey Skin, featuring the artists **Farheen HaQ**, **Heather Passmore**, **Chantal Rousseau**, and **Miya Turnbull**, is an eerie visual presentation of beautiful and unsettling images dealing with the self-presentation of women in relation to the gaze, both male and female.

Image: Chantal Rousseau, "les filles du roi," animation (2004).

Essay by Emmy Anglin

In what the New York Times has called an “unidentifiable filmic object,” Jacques Demy’s 1970 film “Donkey Skin” recasts a French fable with Catherine Deneuve as a princess disguised by her fairy godmother so she won’t have to marry a man she doesn’t love. While Deneuve’s princess is disguised, the film itself arrives at confrontation through quietude, in its own disguise of colour-coding and generic elusiveness, and addresses dark themes like incest through the unlikely airs of a musical. Emily Dickinson wrote, “tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” an idea relevant to the significance of disguise in both Demy’s film and in women’s representation in popular culture and art. Modern Fuel’s upcoming show “Donkey Skin” slips into a skin of its own, borrowing both the title and some of the thematic suggestions of Demy’s film. Four disparate Canadian female artists working with different concerns are linked by this title, which conveys their similarity beyond the shared use of video as medium. Each artist dons the familiar, or the unfamiliar, as a disguise by which to subvert objectification through the gaze.

Miya Turnbull's "PhotoMasks" transmute mask-making into a performance of active, three-dimensional self-portraiture. She projects animations of her masks onto white masks in order to make the apparently inanimate, static space of the faces literally animate, alive with movement, emotion and expression. These faces seem engaged in their own accelerated poetics of communication and its limits, as they emote at a pitch incontrovertible to familiar or easy terms. They seem to speak of language without language, and it remains ambiguous whether the object of the speaker's subtle humour is her own effort at expression or the effort of the viewer to decode it.

The act of covering and uncovering the self with identity's layers is also the subject of **Farheen HAQ's** performance in her video entitled "(un)covering," which depicts the wrapping of six meters of black fabric around her head, as she maintains a steady gaze beyond the viewer. The artist acknowledges how the space depicted moves from performance to a kind of drawing, as the fabric becomes a line and encloses both the artist's body and the viewer's perception. The wrapping and unwrapping of the female body is loaded with public, political constructions of female and cultural identity, and HAQ stares back at a public which has mapped her, as she physically undoes the coding used to define her.

The line is also subversively redrawn in **Chantal Rousseau's** "Historiettes." Rousseau makes movement central to the function and significance of her work; her figures, whether bird or woman, remain primarily static within the diurnal timescape of looped animation. Small changes occur with sad, fresh humour against a backdrop that suggests an overwhelming sense that change is impossible. The sexual depiction of her female body is transformed through her subtle use of line and motion to reveal the constructedness of objectification, and reinvigorates her subject's sexuality with a stillness native to private, interior consciousness, rather than the impersonal, public, and totalizing movements of the gaze as it crosses the lines of the female striptease.

Though the bikini's effect on twentieth century visual vocabulary was as atomic as the blasting site for which it was named, **Heather Passmore's** Bikini Project works quietly rather than explosively. Despite its quietude, the project, 294 snapshots of mostly bikini-clad women projected as a looping slide-show, effects a cumulative, detectable murmur of mixed voices, like those of women coming and going in rooms at some vaguely remembered party—though Passmore's women are dressed not for cocktails but for the beach. The collection of snapshots of women is imbued with the mournfulness common to found art, and the dislocation wrought by the missing story; the snapshots were donated to the artist by a log salvor who found them in an album in Howe Sound in the summer of 2002. In this case, there are many missing stories, and they are all the more poignant for their mystery. Who are all these bathers and why has someone pressed their images into an album like butterflies? Both the stories behind the assembly and of the individual women pictured must be imagined as they appear; the smiles, poses, and patterns achieving an almost phantasmagoric effect through accumulation. The sad humour that pervades Passmore's work is an echo in the work of all the emerging artists exhibiting work at Modern Fuel's "Donkey Skin."

Farheen HAQ (Victoria, BC) is a visual artist working with photo, performance and video installation. Her work explores ideas of cultural inscriptions of the body, gender, ritual and gesture. She has upcoming shows in Toronto, London and New Brunswick.

Heather Passmore lives in Vancouver where she obtained an MFA from UBC in 2004. Her practice is conceptually based and works across a variety of processes and mediums as needed. Her projects typically explore the politics of taste, class, and art through the reconfiguration of socio-historically laden materials.

Chantal Rousseau is a Toronto-based artist whose practice includes painting, drawing, video and animation. She is a member of Persona Volare, a group of 11 artists who have been showing together since the year 2000. Upcoming exhibitions include a Persona Volare intervention into the permanent collection of the Tom Thompson Memorial Art Gallery, Owen Sound ON.

Miya Turnbull is a multi-disciplinary artist, working with masks and dolls, animation, projection, video performance, painting and photography. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge,

Alberta in 2000, and moved to Halifax in 2002. Miya has exhibited her artwork throughout Canada and has received several grants from the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage.

Donkey Skin Photos

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State of Flux Gallery: *Slide Show* by Kingston based artist Mark Thompson