

What d'ya think you're looking at?

Rosy Martin

In an exhibition that focused so much upon the female nude and the subversion of popular cultural forms, we then decided that we could not ignore the striptease, but needed to make it 'outrageous'. Our performative approach was intentionally carnivalesque and transgressive, drawing its inspiration from engagement with Bakhtin's (1965) work on Rabelais and his notions of 'grotesque realism'. The grotesque body he addresses is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change, in opposition to the Classical body, which may be characterised as monumental, static, closed and sleek, the idealised body that haunts the psyche of desire, the always impossible to physically embody ideal.

'In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm or stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness... it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits¹.'

This image of the pregnant hag is highly ambivalent, from a feminist reading, but it does allow for exuberance and a celebration of the transgressive aspects of the monstrous feminine, which counters idealisations of certain kinds of female beauty. It offers a space, for play and for a broader notion of self expression and self acceptance than the entrapment of forever seeking the impossible Classical perfection.

We moved to using video, and worked in Kay's all white studio in Cambridge, which mirrored the white cube of the typical gallery space and we dressed in the obligatory, ubiquitous black of the private view. In 'what d'ya think you are looking at?' our gestures and poses mirror and subvert the striptease act, as we teasingly removed layer upon layer of black clothing, whilst humming and singing 'The stripper'. Underneath the multiple layers of black lie another visual twist, inspired by my experience of a sprained ankle, tubi-grip² covered our arms and legs. Although this is usually connected to notions of the damaged unhealthy body, we used it as a second skin, tubi-grip as the new lycra, also making a visual reference to Victorian silk stockings, and peeled it off seductively, whilst laughing.

'Several key words spring immediately to mind: riotous, positive, powerful and, of course, outrageous. ... Martin hums and sings 'The Stripper' throughout, bawdy at first and then slowing down to a rhythmic gasp which evokes an excited heartbeat.... Most significantly, they are both laughing which firmly roots this performance in the tradition of the carnivalesque with its associations of risk and excess as the artists reveal themselves, literally, to the audience. What is most appealing is that they look and sound as if they are enjoying themselves, as though they are revelling in peeling off the stigma of old age.³'

The second part of this piece was more confrontational, engaging with the dangers of exposure, in the style of a flasher, and also in terms of exposing the ageing 'othered' body. We took turns to advance towards the camera, removing a full length black coat to reveal our naked bodies, asking 'what d'ya think you're looking at' of the viewer. Our intonation became more angry and challenging as we walked towards the camera, until only our mouths appeared pressed against the lens, disembodied and distorted.

'The real threat posed by older women in a patriarchal society may be the "evil eye" of sharp judgement honed by disillusioning experience, which pierces male myths and

scrutinises male motives in the hard, unflattering light of critical appraisal. It may be that the witch's evil eye was only an eye from which the scales had fallen⁴.'

1. Bakhtin, Mikhail (1965) 'Rabelais and his world', trans H. Iswolsky 1968. Cambridge USA and London UK: MIT Press.
2. Tubi-grip is an elasticated tubular support bandage, designed to provide firm, effective support for sprains, strains and weak joints. When I sprained my ankle, my mother sent me some of her stock of tubi-grip, which she uses to protect and support her severely arthritic knees.
3. Gear, Rachel (2000) 'The old hags are laughing: a response to Outrageous Agers' *Make No.* 87 March - May
4. Walker, Barbara (1983) 'The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets' Harper & Row