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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Subjugation, Consent, and Active Resistance: To Cast Too Bold a Shadow at The 8th Floor



Installation photo, *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow*, October 15, 2020 - February 6, 2021.
The 8th Floor. Photograph by Julia Gillard.

To Cast Too Bold a Shadow

The 8th Floor

October 15, 2020 through February 6, 2021

By NINA MDIVANI, **December 2020**

In a compelling and timely presentation *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow* at The 8th Floor, the totality of a woman's existence within patriarchal systems is broken down into components processed and analyzed by artists. This thoughtful

exhibition is organized by Sara Reisman, George Bolster and Anjuli Nanda at The 8th Floor, exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin. Twelve women artists come from different generations and, yet, engage with the same unresolvable arguments.

Various strands running through this exhibition are aptly captured by the exhibition title originating from a 1960s poem by Adrienne Rich, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” In this poem Rich describes the universe constructed by and for men where we, women, are present in our difference, in our divergence from the norm, from the dogma and the expected molds. All works selected for this exhibition show the resistance, feminist unwillingness to succumb, or at the very least they shine the light of reason onto mindless patriarchal rituals of power. Traditions, social customs and their dogmatic, inescapable, stabilizing pressure constitute the foundation of a status quo, a factor so cynically used by men to justify the suffering, abuse, negligence, othering of women. Yet, the exhibition also includes satisfying alternatives, creative avenues of resistance and fight. Commodification of women as objects for marital transactions, othering, question of consent, and active resistance by women are the themes I picked up, but the show tells multitude of stories, waiting to be discovered by the viewers.



Furen Dai, *Love for Sale*, 2020. Video (color, sound), 7:03min. Video still.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Several works on view directly address nature of a marriage as a transaction, as a process of othering, and as a problematic institution. The viewer is first greeted by

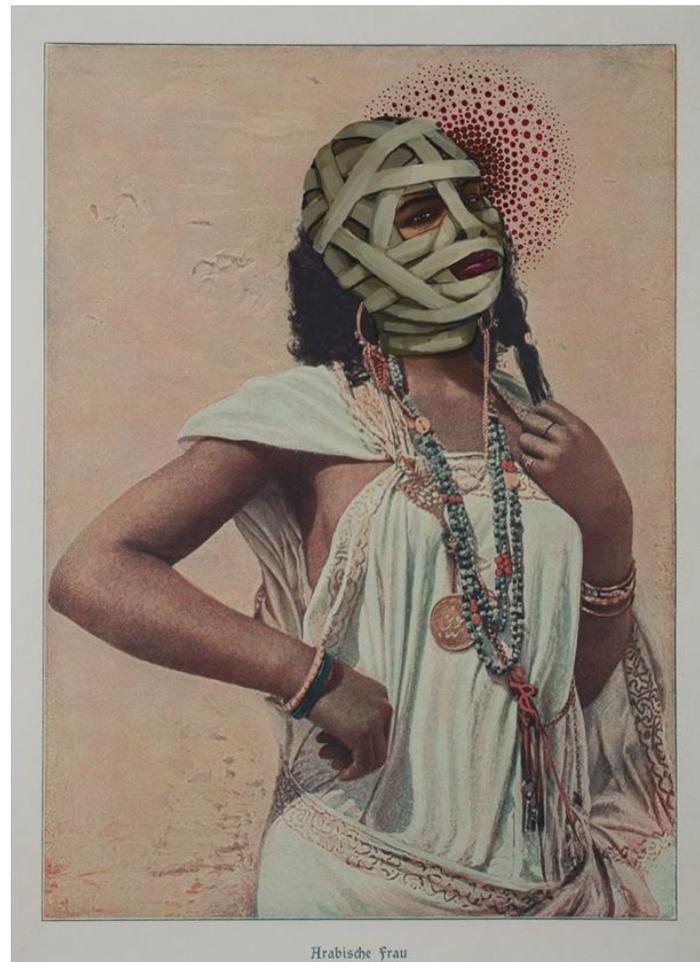
the powerful video work of Furen Dai, *Love for Sale*. Voiceovers included in this monochromatic work are collected from five marriage markets across Beijing. Fates of young women and their virtues as desirable brides are negotiated based on variables of their age, education, class, and immigration histories. Apparently, after 35 years of age one's chance of making a good match significantly drops and a woman's price as a commodity rapidly decreases. Anonymity or rather erasure of identity of a woman who is simultaneously at the center of this transaction is continued as a one of the threads of the exhibition.



Maria D. Rapicavoli, *The Other: A Familiar Story*, 2020. Two channel video installation with sound, 19:40 min, video Still. *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow* installation photograph by Julia Gillard.

In the gorgeously orchestrated two-channel projected film by the Italian artist Maria D. Rapicavoli, specifically commissioned for this exhibition, the artist traces a tale of her relative whose story she adopts as an example of a woman devoid of an agency when bestowed upon a husband who decides her fate. A woman is taken from her hometown of Catania, Italy to Lawrence, Massachusetts as a property, forced to get married, forced to abandon her children and partner, forced to become someone else based on the demands of her patriarchal home community. Rapicavoli uses poignant symbols of ruins, mannequins, collected coins, closet-like enclosures to portray the ordeal and dissociation in the face of suffering. Although some of the used imagery hits home, some of it looks a little belabored.

Othering that the woman experiences by losing her agency is real, but her story becomes too abstract to touch on a personal level.



Rajkaman Kahlon, *Untitled Bandaged Pin Up*, 2017. From the series *Do You Know Our Names?*.
Paint on augmented book pages, 39.5 x 28in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Othering is a theme of two other sets of works on display. Both of them looking at this multifaceted cultural and gender phenomenon through the prism of postcolonialism. Rajkamal Kahlon's series *Do You Know Our Names?* (2017) traces the role of photography as the means of othering, of producing distance between portrayed colonial subjects and the cultured viewer. As her primary source Kahlon uses 1890s German anthropological classic she bought at a used bookshop in Vienna. The artist revitalizes schematically portrayed women through adding vivid details such as dots, lines, coverings. By reintroducing them into the contemporary existence the artist defies presenting women as singular anthropological element of the other locale as originally intended by the book's authors. The same line of reasoning and visual appropriation is used by Joiri Minaya when she manipulates art of Paul Gauguin and Enrique Grau Araujo for the

series of postcards or collated images from dating websites for her installation *#dominicanwomangooglesearch*. Both sets of work address objectification of the Other, stereotype of an exotic women of color created solely for the pleasure of a mostly white male predator.

Another powerful thread running through the exhibition is the question of consent and how it is referenced in private and public domains of a woman's life. Aliza Shvarts' commissioned installation *Anatomy*, 2020 is manufactured from a collection of graphic diagrams used by police departments of different states culled from so called rape kits used to document sexual assaults. Anatomy drawings inside those kits intentionally lack precision, while also missing out on crucial details of whether consent was or was not part of an incident. A more public context of the consent is explored through Yoko Ono's now legendary *Cut Piece*. In the performance piece originally staged in 1964 Ono gives her audience a consent to undress her piece by piece by cutting with scissors parts of her clothes. The result is striking and unnerving. Ono's stoical presence is matched by delighted faces of audience members who slowly destroy her garments.



Betty Tompkins, *Apologia (Caravaggio #1)*, 2018. Painted text on torn out page from art history book, 12 x 8 1/2 ins. Courtesy of Betty Tompkins and P.P.O.W, New York.

Betty Tompkins and Mierle Laderman Ukeles both manifest forms of resistance offering hope. Both use stories and words of themselves or of others to show the patriarchal establishment that women are indeed on the rise and finally comfortable in their skin. Mierle Laderman Ukeles' earthy work *Second Binding*, 1964 presents cheesecloth overstuffed with rags and newspaper mounted on a canvas. Abstract parts of an abstract body are pulsating with life and libido or so it seems. Not surprisingly this work caused Ukeles to take a leave of absence at Pratt, and later to quit the school completely, as her teachers found her approach to be too sexually explicit in nature.

In her recent series *Apologia*, 2018 artist Betty Tompkins applies hand-written words onto reproductions of well-known artworks. For example, in Tompkins' piece *Apologia (Caravaggio #1)*, 2018, pink, handwritten text across Caravaggio's boy reads: "R. Kelly has close friendships with a number of women who are strong and independent, happy, well-cared for and free to come and go as they please. We deny the many dark descriptions put forth by instigators and liars who have their own agenda for profit and fame."

Tompkins' reference to R. Kelly and other public figures and how they try to mitigate allegations of rape, assault, misconduct, and misuse of patriarchal power is commendable. Only through this honest and visually powerful resistance can we hope to achieve shifts in consciousness. Artists who are also women are here to carry the torch.



Nina Mdivani is Georgiani-born and New York-based independent curator, writer and researcher. Her academic background covers International Relations and Gender Studies from Tbilisi State University, Mount Holyoke College and, most recently, Museum Studies from City University of New York. Nina's book, *King is Female*, published in October 2018 in Berlin by Wienand Verlag explores the lives of three Georgian women artists and is the

first publication to investigate questions of the feminine identity in the context of the Eastern European historical, social, and cultural transformation of the last twenty years. Nina has contributed articles to *Arte Fuse*, *Eastern European Film Bulletin*, *Indigo Magazine*, and *Art Spiel*. As curator and writer Nina is interested in discovering hidden narratives within dominant cultures with focus on minorities and migrations. You can find out more about her work at ninamdivani.com.