

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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PLEASURE
DOUGLAS HUEBLER'S
EVERYONE ALIVE

ELEGY
AND PERFORMANCE:
ANDREW KÖTTING

GOVERNMENT
ART AND ANTI-
PHOTOJOURNALISM

INFILTRATION
SERENE AL-KAWAS'
SPECIAL PROJECT





MIKA ROTTENBERG
AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

A former boys' school with smallish classroom-sized rooms, de Appel is the antithesis of a white cube. As such, it is perfectly suited for Mika Rottenberg's *Dough cheese squeeze and tropical breeze*. *Video works 2003-2010*, a selection of video installations which puts forth a post-feminist critique of capitalism and commodification with ambiguous commentaries on gender and body stereotypes and moderately jokey explorations of Marx's theory of labor and value [March 12—May 8, 2011]. Yet, her theory-laden critique manages to avoid the pitfall of didacticism. In the end, the works' overall weirdness and comical narrative bent win out—think *Willy Wonka* meets Matthew Barney—and make them ripe for repeat viewings.

In her videos, Rottenberg casts unusual female characters with striking attributes, such as hyper muscularity or exceptionally long hair, into fantastical assembly lines where her "talents"—the artist's term for her performers—produce an absurd item that exceeds actual use. *Dough*, 2005–2006, features Queen Raqui, an exceptionally large woman—known as a Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) in fetish circles—confined to one of the factory's seven rooms, next to Tall Kat, a six-foot nine-inch woman. Inside the factory, Raqui's tears, brought on by an allergic reaction to the sniffing of a flower, catalyze the production of goeey dough, which a conveyor belt carries to other women along the way. The final product is packaged and shrink-wrapped, ready to be sold as a commodity, and the work seems more of a celebration than a criticism of Fordism.

Rottenberg's women have a can-do attitude. They are as capable as men—invoking both the fictional Rosie the Riveter promoted by the United States government during World War II and the women who worked in manufacturing plants then. In *Tropical Breeze*, 2004, a female bodybuilder drives a truck while her lithe partner collects her sweat into tissues, which are then repackaged for eventual sale. Rottenberg's far-out scenarios emphasize cooperation as a crucial means to an end, for without it, these entire operations would fall apart.

In *Squeeze*, 2010, Rottenberg's most recent work on view at de Appel, the imaginary factory grows in components and complexity. It also has a larger cast of characters and, for the first time, is connected with the real world. Trixter Bombshell, another BBW, and the strapping blonde Bunny Glamazon hold court over a seemingly more subservient group of women who remain in the compound's shadows. They mash a strange amalgam of blush, rubber, and lettuce that has been passed along an assembly line. The blush has literally been squeezed off the forcibly squashed face of a large woman. This funky mixture is ultimately molded into the shape of a cube. The dark fairytale is intercut with shots of real South Asian women harvesting sap from rubber trees in India and Mexican women picking lettuce in Arizona. Both sets of laborers take turns poking their hands through holes in the ground, entering the imaginary factory world. There, five East Asian women massage their hands and arms with oil. *Squeeze* is by far the most erotic of Rottenberg's videos. It reveals other areas of the factory where a moving wall of appealing posteriors and a twitching tongue get sprayed with water. In the process, the tongue produces the spit that holds the compound together. *Squeeze*'s inclusion of footage of actual workers infects the overt cartoonishness of earlier works like *Tropical Breeze* with the harsher realities of global capitalism, as Rottenberg continues to entertain with her surreal theatricality.

—Chris Bors



AARON KING
ATHENS, GREECE

There is lightness to Aaron King's solo show *5965 Starling* [Andreas Melas Presents; February 16—April 17, 2011]. His playful use of materials evokes the schoolyard and a simpler time when we stuck gum under classroom desks, carved our names into wooden tables and never thought twice about sitting around on dirty cement sidewalks as if they were carpets.

On the surface, the show expresses little more than a joyful irreverence towards formalist sculpture fresh with the unpredictable non-conformism of youth. Yet closer inspection reveals an updated classicism in its approach to form and construction as long, marble limbs transform into a foam and magic-sculpt chunk of a wrestler's thigh presented in all its meaty, tan-lined glory as in *Untitled (Wrestler's leg)*, 2009. Beneath the light-hearted joy of material exploration, most evident in polymorphous strawberry-flavored chewing-gum sculptures and a pair of pencil-constructed cubes, a sense of irony reigns.

Initially, *Untitled (taste the richness)*, 2010, a sunset paradise recalling glossy postcards from the 1980s painted onto a cement block, appears to be a one-liner, at best a swipe at the commercial art that appropriates such aesthetics. However, the joke soon fades as the cement block becomes an epitaph—a metaphor for a world that has coveted paradise so much that it has somehow destroyed any semblance of it. From the building of empires to the birth of political ideologies, earnest efforts to construct ideal existences on a collective level always seem to lead to ownership and conflict—a fate still seemingly inescapable today.

In this sense, *Commodus*, 2010, eight black cement tablets spelling out the work's title, is central to the show. Seen as the representative figure of the Roman Empire's initial decline, Commodus became Roman Emperor at nineteen. A megalomaniac, he cultivated a persona as a demigod, renamed Rome and the twelve months of the year after himself, and presided over the largest devaluation of Roman currency since Nero. In *Commodus*, a streak of white extends below the tail of the letter "u," suggesting the possibility of a "y," and the word

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Mika Rottenberg, still from *Cheese*, 2008, multi-channel video-installation, dimensions variable [The Julia Stoschek Collection, Dusseldorf; courtesy of the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York]; **ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Mika Rottenberg, still from *Dough*, 2005–2006, single-channel video-installation, 7 minutes, ed. of 5 [courtesy of the artist and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York]; Aaron King, *Redhead*, 2010, foam, gum, wood, 45.7 x 27.9 x 22.8 cm [courtesy of the artist and Andreas Melas Presents, Athens]