

MARIANNA SIMNETT
27.10.18–06.01.19



ZOLLAMT^{MMK}

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MARIANNA
SIMNETT

“‘Head down’, she said. And I did. She said that I was ‘too beautiful to play outside.’”

— *Blood In My Milk*, 2018

“So we had done her an injustice; she was not at all abnormal”

— Letter of 8 March 1895 from Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess

As legend has it, Abbess Saint Æbbe the Younger of Coldingham cut off her nose to avoid being raped by the Vikings. Based on that story, in the work by Marianna Simnett, a young girl maims herself. For the sake of her innocence and the promise of freedom, she seeks by these means to escape the threat of male violence. Unadulterated purity and beauty face impending invasion and sickness. Only absolute sterility offers protection from the onset of disease. Within the protective zone, however, the body takes on a life of its own and technological apparatuses gain sovereignty. In a nightmare-like sequence, removed body parts develop consciousness and become vengeful opponents to the body that has shed them. A “minimally invasive” vein operation is performed on a patient unwilling to move. The camera shots blend seamlessly with laboratory experiments on cockroaches whose movements can be controlled by way of targeted shocks. As remote-controlled cyborg cockroaches, the extremely resilient animals are to penetrate regions uninhabitable for man. The animal thus technically manipulated and degraded to an object at the same time possesses a superiority that makes the human body seem all the more vulnerable, powerless in its conditionality and dependent on medical intervention.

In the video installation *Blood In My Milk* by the British artist Marianna Simnett, the individual episodes merge to form a drastic narrative about present-day mechanisms of control that survey gender and the body as contested territory. Obscenity and immersion come about precisely there where the camera does its invasive work, where the closeness of what is shown exceeds our natural faculty of sight and penetrates the body. Every pore, every secret becomes visible. The result is horror, brought about not by fiction but by the realism of the flesh, of the body, of mechanical objects ranging from simple gadgets to high-end technologies. The film sequences are infused with hierarchical power structures and categorical

dichotomies that drastically dissolve, or are painfully defeated by the protagonists, as the narratives unfold. Medical, technological, and pharmaceutical interventions in the human and animal body alike, and their underlying economic, social, and patriarchal power structures, form the dominant narrative in the work of Marianna Simnett. The boundaries, both cultural and ideological, that the protagonists constantly run into are invisible, but nonetheless violent. The constant control exercised by everyone over everyone and by the self over the self brings about a rigid system with conditional loss of control from which it is impossible to escape unharmed. Simnett's figures seek their freedom in places where, from a position of powerlessness, they are forced to act while at the same time they are incapable of acting. Their actions are drastic, irrational, violent. Their bodies become objects of negotiation only to be reconquered bit by bit in the course of the film.

The film script of *Blood In My Milk* is based on a long research process during which Marianna Simnett talked with doctors, farmers, and students—also as a means of developing a language for the protagonists. All roles were played by non-actresses and non-actors who are shown carrying out their real professions in the film. The five-channel video installation *Blood In My Milk* is the first exhibition of Marianna Simnett's work in Europe outside England.

Marianna Simnett

Blood In My Milk, 2018

73 minutes, 5-channel HD video installation with 9.1 surround sound
Courtesy of the artist

"Head down," she said. And I did. She said that I was
"too beautiful to play outside."

She said that me being outside could entice

"the corrupter, the abuser, the abused corrupted in
accepted ways."

Exposure to the outside world opens up the risk
of invasion.

Mastitis mastitis

My mammary gland is in pain

Chastity, chastity,

Give me the strength to abstain

Mastitis mastitis

I'm swollen, so sore and inflamed.

Chastity, chastity,

Chastity is my refrain!

There was moderate bleeding from the nose and mouth.

The odor was very bad.

Before anyone had time to think, at least half a meter
of gauze had been removed from the cavity.

The next moment came a flood of blood.

The patient turned white, her eyes bulged, and she had
no pulse.

The poor creature was unrecognizable.

We are inferior to you.

Don't be so hard on yourself!

We know we come nowhere near to you.

Yes you do!

But we belong to your interior

And you cut us out.

Without us you're just a cavity.

A sack of depravity

An empty snout.

My nose is smooth

Now I've removed you.

I suppose I'd rather be alone.

I don't want my turbinate bones.

Do you feel cold?

Yes.
And dry?
I wonder why!
Do you feel hoarse?
Of course!
You were a curse, a growing burden
And now I'm certain I would rather be alone.
I don't want my turbinate bones.

Little droplets. Big phobia. Excessive hypochondria.
"Minimally invasive," he says. The regret of crossing
my legs.
And now blue roses are growing on my legs. To think
that it's all in my head. Not an imagining, for that
might imply a fantasy or romance, I mean to think of it
all in my head. All because I crossed my legs for too long.
Don't stand up. The ill of upright. Illness of the up.

Perfect steering
Perfect engineering
Near or far, I will decide for you
There's no need to think about what to do.
There's no need to think about what to do.
I've brought you up to be
Better than you were originally.
Better than we were originally.
Just make sure you always return.

And they keep returning
The veins that I complain about hurting
Keep on turning
They're learning to behave
They won't go away

Blood collects
Valves collapse
Don't stand up
Blood on a tap

And they keep returning.
The veins I complain about hurting.
If you wish the superficial away
It will be deeper the following day.
If you think it's bad now it will be even worse
Before you try to cut it try to love it first.

I've got varicose veins, they're ready to burst
I've got varicose veins.

Be welcome, wanderer
To a world with no pain.
Men, gather
Make your voices low again.

"Make my voice low like the boys'."
"I'm afraid this procedure's for male patients only."
"If you don't let me through, I'll tell all the birds to sing
and when they sing, your dick will become so hard
that the birds will think it's a seedstick for eating."

Take a little bit of girl
Dress her like a sick rose
Add some tears to her eyes
Make her cry for a dose

Wait a little while
Watch her pretty petals fade
Hold a thorn between your fingers
Cut your thumb against her blade

But keep her crying
Keep me crying
Keep her dying for a dose
Keep me dying

Feel the edges of your mind burst
Bad enough to break apart
The world till there's no reverse
Force the corners
Of your smile to work
High enough to hide the blame
High enough to bide the pain

Conversation

Marianna Simnett / Susanne Pfeffer

SUSANNE PFEFFER Your work often deals with drawing boundaries—cultural and structural. The way you portray these delineations gets quite physical. You have a very structured, almost analytical take on society, gender, class, on ways of living, and technology. I was struck by how you bring these things together, in a way similar to how they coexist in the world.

MARIANNA SIMNETT I'm interested in transgression, going beyond oneself and what it means to escape the confines of social or cultural norms. For me this comes from a place of resentment or anger, a deep frustration with the status-quo. I'm always wanting to fight my way out. I don't believe that there are hermetically sealed worlds, such divisive binaries. There is always the possibility of collapse or empathy, of going beyond oneself into another realm. I want to give my subjects a new autonomy, so they are able to occupy multiple genders and sites at the same time. Letting go of the importance of a capital "I" allows me to take more risks, to make decisions that confront danger and sometimes involve self-inflicted pain and discomfort.

S.P. The protagonists in your films are faced with a sense of collapse and the process of overcoming collapse. This is a very brutal process, because it means either destroying yourself or destroying something else just to survive.

M.S. I don't use fiction just to fantasize. Humor is useful as a means to fight your way through existing systems and find alternative realities. Much of the time I feel we are all living in a fiction. I keep trying to reinvent the narrative. Many of the connections I make are irrational.

S.P. In speculative realism there is the concept of multiple, parallel realities. So, in this sense I wouldn't call your work irrational, because maybe it's just another ratio, another concept. For the same reason, I would disagree with the scientist who claims that a cockroach does not feel, just because it has a small brain. I am sure that cockroaches simply have a different way of thinking than

we do, and we shouldn't be so arrogant as to judge their manner of perception.

M.S. This is a horrible symptom of human egotism—to look down on a creature because it's small and assume it doesn't have any feelings. I think you have to accept the gap between yourself and others, and actively work towards creating new kinships.

S.P. And also try to put yourself in the situation of a different being.

M.S. It is hard.... You naturally want to understand and conquer.

S.P. I feel we are living in a culture that is very much dominated by the [written] word. Like all other visual artists, you seem to have a very visual way of thinking. Visual thinking, communicating through images, is radically different from language. It creates a system of its own that exists alongside language.

M.S. My work is as much about touch or texture or sound as it is about words. I want my work to have impact on a physical or visceral level, to create connections that exist outside of purely cognitive thinking.

S.P. How did it come about that you started to work with non-actors?

M.S. At first I did work with professional actors, but the quality of their acting began to override my intentions for the work. There was a gap that I couldn't get over. Everything felt false and frivolous. The switch first happened with a work called *Dog* (2013), in which I asked an older woman to play the role of my dog in a training class surrounded by real dogs and their owners.

S.P. Maybe your fantastical realism can only unfold in the context of an immanently real setting.

M.S. Actually, more recently I've been dissolving the boundaries of what we understand as real, which in older works was distinguishable from the theatrical. I don't see these divisions as clearly as I used to. I think this gives my protagonists options. I mean, okay, they're always

stuck or upside down or unable to move. In some way, they're trapped inside the films. But now I give them more agency. Chastity is supposed to be bad, a restraint imposed on women through centuries of patriarchy. Who wants to respect the idea of purity, especially in a religious context today? Not many. But I invert how we're supposed to read an obsolete word. I bastardize it and turn it into something else.

S.P. The idea of chastity is an instrument of power. This was true in the past and still is.

M.S. You cannot alter words completely, but you can renew them.

S.P. Women are still just the "other." To me, it is quite frustrating that it hasn't changed much.

M.S. Yeah, it's frustrating. I never thought that I was making work explicitly about gender. Because I have such a complex relationship to my own gender, how I grapple with this issue becomes an unconscious lens through which I question power structures. It's a pressing issue and one that my body has been trying to resist far earlier than I had tools to describe it.

S.P. Your work is about reflecting that complexity. Another thing that strikes me in your work is the use of music and rhythm, which forms a kind of language. Then there is also the use of language itself, which is very onomatopoeic.

M.S. The music comes from themes in the work. For example, what sound is the most convincing way to convey valves or bones? I used to only include music when the characters would sing on screen. Later on, I broke that rule, and music now plays an increasingly dominant role, equal to that of the image.

I like how sound works with the unconscious. After it disappears, it still rings in your head. Most of the chants are like nursery rhymes, catchy songs that people can't help singing to themselves. People always remember them! They are not intentionally catchy, but then I like having moments when people can sit back and enjoy and not have to focus on shielding their eyes or worry about what's coming next.

S.P. There's the rhythm in the music and language that you use but there's also a rhythm to how you cut and combine long and short sequences together.

M.S. I cut in the same way that a surgeon might cut a body. There's a tenderness to it. I'm not frantic in the way I splice. I try to put things together that jar or have impossible, endoscopic angles. I suddenly switch to a viewpoint that you wouldn't naturally have. I think of editing in the same way I think about music. Storytelling needs pacing, needs pick-up points, needs climactic moments—and pauses.

S.P. The language of your protagonists—how much is this a mixture of interviews with the people you're working with and their personalities, and how much is fiction and poetry?

M.S. There is a lot of poetry and invention. It's a balance between what is often quite dry language, that you might find in a manual or an old school text on disease, and my own imagination. I swallow it whole.

I also find the language of doctors and the way they talk to patients incredibly moving. I borrow lines like: "We eat eels every day. The puppy bit the tape. Brian bored me over dinner." These are alliterative exercises used to test speech patterns, and they make their way into the script. I start to fold their language into mine until the two are synthesized. I leave behind the original meaning, and start to fuse all these ideas into one.

S.P. And is it difficult for the characters to adapt to that language? Or is it already so close to their own, that it is easy for them? They are such natural actors. You never have the feeling that they are not experts.

M.S. That's why I work with non-actors, because they're better! There is so much delicacy in the way a surgeon holds a needle, for example. You can't train a novice to do that. All I do is tell them a story, into which they have been carefully written. In the surgeon's case, I suggest a demonic edge to his character. They then perform their skills and their profession as they always do. Through my composition and forensic scrutiny the meaning changes. I always think about how to texture language—through images, music, sound, hands, objects—and I try not to

privilege the voice. Rarely do I use voice-over because it conveys an omnipotence that is trying to govern the narrative. The off-screen voice in my work is more of a spiritual voice coming from an unknown place that is never a place of knowledge. It is never saying: "I know more than you. You're going to listen to me, and I am going to tell the story how it is." There always have to be more options for the viewer to create their own narrative.

S.P. What makes it so intense is that it's like an inner dialogue that you can be part of. It brings you closer to the characters. Like Isabel, who repeats what her mother is saying to her. It is as if she makes this voice her own and establishes a relationship with it—and through this process there is a sense of intimacy with her. Your color choice is also quite explicit. The colors seem to be protagonists of their own.

M.S. Color helps create a world for the characters to believe in. The palette is carefully chosen for everything, from the costumes to the set design. There's the peachy flesh, the garish pink.... Often I choose colors I really hate, like the pink in the young girl's bedroom. I don't necessarily like to represent the things I want to see in the world. Sometimes I show the opposite and exaggerate it until it starts to become horrific. Like the girls in the hammocks. Sure that's sweet, but it's also disgusting. Imagine if that was in your house.

S.P. The cruelty of the children and that juxtaposition of them as being sweet and at the same time disturbing and repellently ugly—it reminds me of horror films.

M.S. I like horror because it often goes beyond the human, dealing with monsters, zombies, fairies, hauntings, ghosts—some of it is trash, but often it tries to celebrate something delightfully grotesque.

S.P. I think the characters are interesting because they are transgressive. I think we are in an era where the human is transgressive in the context of technology and pharmacology and is being increasingly capitalized. Especially the body is being capitalized and transformed too fast. I think the idea of the contemporary human as a zombie has never been so real.

Glossary

BLUE ROSES

Blue, worm-like protrusions on the leg.

A symbol of love, prosperity or immortality. The flower does not exist in nature as roses lack the specific gene able to produce true blue.

BOTULINUM TOXIN, AKA BOTOX

A neurotoxic protein produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*, discovered in the 19th century through mass deaths caused by botulism. Can be used variously as a poison, treatment, and a weapon.

BOTULISM

Food poisoning caused by bacterium growing on badly tinned meat and other preserved food.

BOTULUS

Latin for “sausage.”

CHASTITY

Purity, abstinence, a way out of the worst invasion. A powerful tool which can stave off corruption and the oncoming threat of mastitis.

CUT OFF THE NOSE TO SPITE THE FACE

Expression probably originating from Saint Æbbe, who avoided rape by Viking invaders through an act of self-mutilation. She took a razor and cut off her nose and upper lip in front of the other sisters, who followed her example, so that frustrated in this way, the Vikings would make no attempt against their virtue. When the Vikings arrived they were so disgusted that they locked the women in their convent and set it on fire, killing their whole community.

CYBORG COCKROACH

Half cockroach, half-machine. Believed to have the capacity to save humans from disasters such as earthquakes or nuclear leaks due to their natural resilience and ability to crawl into small spaces.

EMMA ECKSTEIN

Female patient of Freud who was given a botched turbinectomy to cure her of menstrual problems, stomach

cramps, and masturbation. She was left permanently disfigured, with the left side of her face caved in.

GANGLIA

A set of nerve clusters in insects which form their central nervous system. In cyborg cockroaches, locomotion control can be achieved through electrical stimulation of the prothoracic ganglia, via a remotely operated backpack system and implanted electrodes.

JUST DOING MY JOB

Expression commonly used to avoid personal responsibility.

JUSTINUS KERNER

German poet and medic who described the first cases of botulism.

LEECH

A worm with suckers at both ends, sometimes placed by should-be virgins on their labias to create a scab in place of their hymen which would bleed on having sex after marriage.

MASTITIS

Inflammation of the mammary gland in the breast or udder, typically due to bacterial infection via a damaged nipple or teat.

MINIMALLY INVASIVE

Surgery associated with less pain.

NASAL REFLEX NEUROSIS

Theory developed by otolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess, confidant and collaborator of Sigmund Freud. He postulated causes of neurosis based on his belief of a profound connection between the nose and the genitals.

NOSE

Poke around, pry, preempt, promise.

PUBERPHONIA, AKA FALSETTO

Voice disorder characterized by a man's use of a high-pitched voice after puberty.

TURBINECTOMY

Partial or complete removal of the inferior turbinate bones.

TURBINATE BONES

Three pairs of bony shelves which stick from the side wall of the nose. They clean, warm, humidify, and filter the air that we breathe in, and help to regulate airflow.

UDDER

A bag-like organ hanging beneath a female cow and other ungulates, consisting of pairs of mammary glands and protruding teats.

WE EAT EELS EVERY DAY

Alliterative speech exercise for boys.

Credits

Blood In My Milk, 2018
73 min., 5-channel HD video
installation, 9.1 surround sound
Courtesy the artist

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Girl: Marianna Simnett
Younger Brother: Jerome Somerlinck
Older Brother: Marcel Somerlinck
Sick Boys: Bruno Camilleri,
George Kelly, Henry Knox,
Finn Moore, Sam Thomas,
Oscar Todman, George Turner
Mother: Emma Maclaren-Fraser
Herdsman: Simon Flitney
Bones: Molly Perry-White, Olivia Spink
ENT Surgeon: Dr Claire Hopkins
Vascular Surgeon: Dr Mark Whiteley
Voice Surgeon: Dr Declan Costello
Cockroach Engineer: Hong Liang
Guard: Daniel Coonan
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Cambridge, Elena Carmen, Henry
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Mouse Handler: Raven
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Marianna Simnett

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