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*Nathalie Djurberg*

Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

By Leah Modigliani

Over the last few years Nathalie Djurberg's stop motion animations have been rightfully singled out by the art world as particularly provocative and refreshing. The artist boldly wrestles with contemporary content through her animation of handmade plasticine humans and animals, which act out transgressive social behaviors in simple one-scene scripts that are set to melodramatic music composed by Hans Berg. The resulting videos are both captivating and grotesque. *Tiger Licking Girls Butt* (2004) showed a Tony-the-Tiger type character licking a passive girls rear end with the reoccurring subtitle "Why do I have this urge to do these things over and over again?" a phrase that referenced both sexual compulsions and the creative process.

Djurberg's recent solo show at Zach Feuer Gallery continues themes explored in earlier work through two new animations and a sculptural installation, each displayed separately in its own room. The best of these was the 9 1/2 minute stop motion animation *I Found Myself Alone* (2008), which opens with the camera panning across a large table set for tea with a candlestick, teapot, cookies and pastries. The pastries have the ornate decorative flourishes of Rococo porcelain but are sculpted out of modeling clay in an expressive style more suggestive of Wayne Thiebaud's painted cakes. A black ballerina, scaled the same size as the teapot, moves into this tableau clad in a frothy tutu and begins dancing across the table until something like candle wax or white frosting starts dripping on her from above and ruins her momentum. At this point she angrily begins defacing the table by stomping on cookies, pouring brown tea out onto everything, and smearing chocolate sauce over the white teapot. Because this peculiar revenge on the classic eighteenth British tea service is made by a black ballerina, the narrative and setting are imbued with the long hangover of colonial exploitation, a once covert power dynamic whose effects remain but are no longer so easily identifiable. The ballerina's actions defile the purity of the white setting and turn the table brown, a transformation that might be considered positive, if the ballerina did not appear dead at the end, suffocated by falling white wax (or frosting). It seems that the dancer's

heroic will for asserting herself in the face of a weighty oppression is not enough to keep her alive.

The exhibition also included an installation of sculptures: a glazed ceramic version of the original plasticine tea table seen in *I Found Myself Alone* encased on a large pedestal, two sets of long velvet curtains painted expressively with flowers, and lots of brown acrylic paint hand-smearred on the curtains and walls of the gallery to resemble shit. The tea service sculpture on its own served as a kind of physical documentation for the video, but did not inspire extended contemplation as a piece in its own right. The shit-smearred walls, in their base matter-of-factness, actually worked against the success of *I Found Myself Alone* by closing down the more complex avenues of interpretation apparent in her video.

*Of course I'm working with magic* (2007) played on a loop in the second viewing room. This animation was made from charcoal drawings executed in a nineteenth century symbolist style reminiscent of Odilon Redon or Edvard Munch. It featured a naked female figure that is assaulted in a forest while a series of mostly first-person commentaries narrate the scene. At the beginning a young girl steps into a clearing between two trees as an accompanying subtitle reads, "you smell bad, have you stopped washing yourself?" Over the course of the five-minute video, she menstruates and defecates before progressing through various stages of age, dismemberment and monstrosity while trapped between the trees. Although it's the tree branches that first rape her, by the middle of the video the abuse is internalized and self-inflicted. This transition is echoed in subtitles that read, "my eyes flow of obscenity" and "I penetrate the smallest elements within myself." By the end the woman had torn away her own flesh to reveal her decaying skeleton. Echoing the themes in *I Found Myself Alone*, the woman is psychologically and physically compromised by her entrapment within societal and personal expectations of her "nature." The choice of charcoal drawing works well with this content, because the smudgy erasure markings serve as powerful metaphors for physical mutilation. However, the drawing itself does not stand out as particularly strong, a formal element that might make the animation more compelling to watch.

Djurberg's strength as an artist is still best represented in her stop motion animations made of clay, a material that she uses in a gestural childlike manner that naturally complements and diffuses her pointed socio-political subject matter. Her early forays into new mediums like drawing and installation seem less assured and consequently not as successful, but this may change over time. Nonetheless, this exhibition continues to tackle large themes: cultural difference and assimilation in a post-colonial world, and the dominance and imposition of cultural norms onto the body and psychology of individuals, often women. These subjects are communicated in an earnest and engaging way that seems genuinely reflective of the artist's creative and intellectual interests.