

VISUAL ART

what it feels like for a girl

Scott Treleaven

After his long-standing term as curator at Toronto's Power Plant, Phillip Monk's inaugural exhibit at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) has been highly anticipated. When he unveiled the title, "what it feels like for a girl," lifted from the Madonna video purportedly banned for its depictions of violence against men, and an artist line-up of local favourites, there was mixed reaction. The show seems to be less about gender and constructions of femaleness than about amassing artists whose tenacity and iconic signature style can lure an audience up to York from the downtown core; specifically: Fiona Smyth, Julie Voyce, Louise Liliefeldt, Karma Clarke-Davis and Peaches.

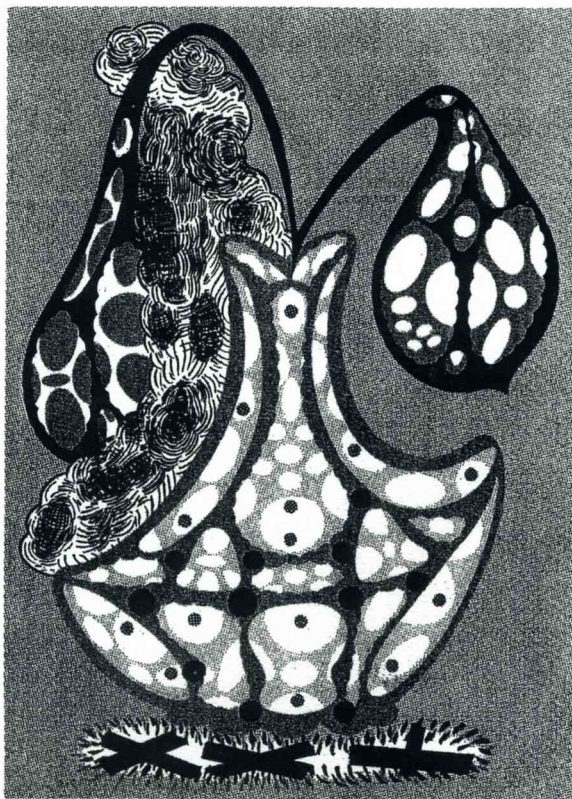
None of the works here carries the bombastic reflexivity that a Madonna-inspired title might imply. In fact, the most striking elements of the show have a serene, almost heavily psychedelic component to them, reminiscent of the "new gothic" style currently sweeping New York. Not that the show is without its chaotic aspects. A loud projection by electroclash minx Peaches, in a duet with the grandpa of New York punk, Iggy Pop, dominates the reception area of the gallery. Singing a trash-talking, thunderous he said/she song, "Kick It,"

2003, Pop and Peaches are superimposed next to each other, giving them the illusion of being in the same space. The duet itself is real, but the superimposition allows the viewer to select a DVD track, and thereby choose a private karaoke session with one of the stars. If Peaches sets out to be an indie success, then singing alongside Iggy Pop is an apotheosis. The fact that the viewer can enter into either role in the duet is a clever testament to the lo-fi, if-I-can-you-can-too empowerment of her music.

The main room is dominated by what seem like the three most fully realized works in the show, the most arresting being a mural by Fiona Smyth. *Spinnbarkeit and the Science of Elasticity*, 2003, devours an entire wall with its swooping blackness. Painted throughout are dynamic, esoteric figures like Bast, Ganesh and a host of chalked-in parasitical organisms. Words like "foxy" and "Lukkie" dominate and recur. A girl with a Manson family-style x on her forehead, yoni bared, rises out of the face of a huge woman with an impossibly huge tongue. The tongue sweeps past a pair of mountainous breasts that ejaculate milk into the air, alighting on 12 fanged nymphettes and a woman with a creature visible in her womb. In the same way that an artist like Joe Coleman can manage to shock with his singular mix of style and subject, so Smyth's cartoon-like style combines with her visionary subject matter into something astonishing.

Just as evocative, and certainly as unsettling as Smyth's mural, are master printer Julie Voyce's latest screen prints. With their thick black outlines, filled to bursting with subdued psychedelic blue and orange patterns, the collage-like style gives the viewer the sensation of gazing into a drawer filled with loosely related objects. Most startling are the prints' air of tactility; there are pins, jewels, shells, swashes of fur, smoke, crystals and even, resonating with Smyth's chalk parasites, fields of microbes. It's one of the most beautiful examples of this series, *Striking Oil*, 2001, a fiery and elegantly uterine image, that graces the show poster. Also included are examples from Voyce's prodigious mail art campaign, in which she swaps and bestows unconcealed works of art through the post. *Lovely Whads #4*, 2003, even contains a list of correspondents who've recently graced her own mailbox. Brightly coloured and exuberant, when the impressionistic aspects of her prints give way to the exquisite corpses and alien figures of her mail art, they become even more giddily disquieting.

The final component in the room is Louise Liliefeldt's untitled performance video. Shot in York's coliseum-like Vari Hall, the two-screen installation features a roving camera-eye view of the event by video artist Leslie Peters, as well as a stationary, panoramic perspective of the performance area. Interestingly, between the different stations of the performance, the artist approaches the stationary camera and seems to meditate into its lens



top: Julie Voyce, *Striking Oil*, 2001, silk screen, 26.7 x 36.8 cm. Courtesy the artist.

below: Fiona Smyth, detail from mural, *Spinnbarkeit and the Science of Elasticity*, 2003.

before continuing. Performance documentation usually lacks this kind of relation to the camera, and tends to fail because of it. In this case, these moments serve to rivet the viewer, periodically, throughout its 60 minutes. Known for the physical intensity of her performances, Liliefeldt can be seen smashing glass, skipping rope to exhaustion, dunking her head repeatedly into water (seemingly to

the point of near-drowning), and performing a dangerous game of tapping a knife blade between her splayed fingers—think less *Alien* and more Martha Rosler's *Semiotics for the Kitchen*. The objects used in the performance are on forensic display beside the monitor, while the sparse musical accompaniment

and the live sounds of Liliefeldt's performance give respite from the crash and stammer of the soundtracks that bleed in from the other installations.

The two untitled videos by Karma Clarke-Davis were, uncharacteristically, not as engaging as some of the other pieces on

offer. At first the slinky soundtrack and the seductive, sideways images of the artist's lips hint at something erotic. Certainly the over-saturated colour scheme and solarized images of driving through snow were in keeping with the psychedelic undercurrent in Smyth and Voyce. Then, further into the video we see Clarke-Davis, a black artist plaintively staring back at us in black face, adding yet another layer of intricacy to the mix. But ultimately the layers, while sumptuous, don't quite gel. Alone, the images feel intrepid; combined, they somehow lose their impact. Similarly, Clarke-Davis's newest piece (specifically commissioned for "what it feels like ..."), in which she boxes herself bloody with a handsome male boxer, comes near but misses that deliciously dangerous level of inquiry for which her work is so well known.

Curiously, the final wing of the show is a small rec room, replete with cushions and carpet, where a selection of Peaches's early DIY music video collaborations with small-gauge filmmaker Kara Blake, *Diddle My Skittle* and *Lovertits*, 2000, play on a loop. The works are filthy and fun, but it's baffling why these aren't the first thing one sees coming into the gallery, saving the karaoke blowout as the peak of the whole exhibition experience. The viewer would certainly be even more compelled to join the action and feel, for a moment anyway, what it at least might feel like for Peaches. While "what it feels like ..." certainly enlivens

AGYU's typically staid approach to exhibitions, it never gives the viewer anything didactic to hang on, and the strongest pieces emerge as the works that offer up the idea of "girl" in the most nebulous kind of ways. ■

"what it feels like for a girl" was on exhibit at the Art Gallery of York University from December 3, 2003, to February 1, 2004.

Scott Treleaven is a Toronto-based writer, artist and filmmaker. He has recently exhibited at Deitch Projects, Brooklyn, and Galerie du jour agnes b., Paris.

