

Mika who?

The tale of a man who came to see some Gillray's but was drawn to a video of a man sneezing out rabbits.

I lever myself into the wooden structure before me. Standing at over 6 foot my body bends and twists unconformably. I seek seek out screens. Led by sound I find videos of long haired women milking cattle and combing hair. My handbook tells me the work is called *Cheese*. I exit feeling confused and disorientated. I suspect that might have been the point.

Mika Rottenberg is not a name familiar to me. But given that James Gillray is, I was keen to unpick the logic of having exhibitions of the two artists side-by-side. If *Cheese* was Gillray-esque only in the bodily contortions I was forced into just to see the work (I'm sure Gillray himself would have found the scene I presented worthy of a pencil sketch), irreverent Georgian humour was more evident in *Sneeze*. This 3 minute video had a simple premise. A man in a business suit sits at a table in a damp, drab room. He has a gross, distended nose, rendered itchy by some unknown aggressor. After some suspense he sneezes. And what does he sneeze out? Well rabbits of course. Or lightbulbs. After a sufficiently long fit of sneezing we move onto a second man, and a finally a third before the video returns to the beginning, creating an unending and unceasing loop of violent comic sneezing. I, for many repeat viewings, roared with laughter. But the comic hilarity of this scenario is brilliantly undercut by the discomfort of each man scratching the concrete floor with their jagged, painted toenails. For each laugh the work focuses in on a moment of chalkboard scraping hell, thus amplifying the former and the latter into a ball of confused sensory euphoria.

So, confused again, but this time with my own senses, I move on. A woman, dressed somewhere between a stewardess and a department store manager, proudly holds aloft (but slightly away from her) a cube of identifiable filth - a cacophony of greenery, metal, and other detritus. The meaning of this is a mystery (you guessed it, confused again...) but a rumble of machinery promises to hold the answer. I follow that sound, but no answers are forthcoming. I see some women in a field, possibly of Central or South American origin. They stretch their arms through holes in the ground which emerge in front of a row of Chinese women who moisturise and massage the limbs before them. With a telling slap, each arm is sent away, and the field workers amble towards a large mechanical apparatus with wheels, arms, and conveyor belts. Upon this they throw lettuce, freshly chopped from the an apparently limitless field. The machine rumbles on. They keep feeding it lettuce. The cycle could last forever.

Suffice to say the 20 minutes of film which make up *Squeeze* lie beyond my descriptive powers. Or indeed your patience as a reader. Quite simply, to roll out an old cliché, it demands to be seen to be believed. Female workers drain rubber from trees. A bored woman is heated, cooled, and fed, occasionally accompanied by an obese black woman rotating on a plinth. Another woman has blusher literally squeezed from her. And lettuce is crushed. All of these processes interconnected by some Heath Robinson esque causality, and all are demanding and unceasing for those involved.

I watched *Squeeze* twice. 40 minutes of fascinating monotony left little appetite for further stimulation. The corny inanity of *Tropical Breeze* raised a laugh, yet *Dough*, made 4 years before *Squeeze*, seemed inadequate in comparison, dwarfed by the complexity, polish, and ambiguity of her newer, shinier stablemate. In some ways placing *Squeeze* alongside Rottenberg's other work is akin to placing a Gillray in a room of works designed by his contemporaries, men such as Thomas Rowlandson, Richard Newton, and Isaac Cruikshank.

For once the Gillray is in the room all eyes are drawn to it, and all minds see its competitors as inferior.

I shouldn't comment on what Gillray would make of Rottenberg. To do so would be crass and meaningless. Moreover, logically speaking, we just can't know. But if I were to be so crass as to do so, I might say that he would understand the decision by Rottenberg to present extremity, be that bodily or situationally, to challenge her audience. Whether or not we understand Gillray or Rottenberg is perhaps not the point. We approach their work with a desire to enquire and to learn. If we leave them a little confused, then what I ask is the harm in that?

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