

On What To Do With Bodies

'Our bodies, with the old genetic transmission, have not kept pace with the new language-produced cultural transmission of technology. So now, when social control breaks down, we must expect to see pathological destruction.' – Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991)

Honestly Speaking: The Word, the Body and the Internet includes artwork by Shahryar Nashat (Switzerland), Sriwhana Spong (New Zealand), Frances Stark (United States) and Martine Syms (United States). These four presentations ask questions about our intimacy with 'screen life'.

While this era can be distinguished by ready access to digital technologies, information and ready access to digital image-making, *Honestly Speaking* looks at our relationship with 'screen culture' by referencing human subjects directly in front of the screen. It focuses on this in its most visceral or personal form – as bodies in dialogue. The four artists in this exhibition balance an exploration of subjectivity with a critique of representation as it has evolved in the space of film, video and moving image technologies.

In the first room of the exhibition UK-based New Zealand artist Sriwhana Spong presents *Now Spectral, Now Animal*, 2019/20, at the heart of which is an interpretation of the writing of St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). Spong, who has made two previous films exploring the writing of female mystics, uses St Teresa's text to explore a transition between apparent opposites – principally the worlds outside and inside the body. Her video work, titled *Crystal Castle* after Teresa's *Interior Castle*, represents the permeable membrane between fiction and non-fiction, interior and exterior, the world and the body. This membrane is made material in *Spectral, Now Animal* in the form of the screen's translucent surface onto and through which the film is projected.

The first artwork in the exhibition's central room is by Los Angeles-based Martine Syms. Her installation, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017 is set in the striking purple

of the gallery walls. This is a regular motif for Syms as she recalls Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1985), with its African-American female protagonist and narrator, Celie. The purple wall provides the backdrop for a text painting consisting of varied spellings of 'Girl', the central character of Syms' video. The video narrative follows 'Girl' from Los Angeles to Mississippi on a meandering road journey which is regularly interrupted by scenes of another key character, Queen, who offers advice on how to improve the image and life of her Black subject. Following her 2015 performance *Misdirected Kiss, Incense Sweaters & Ice* channels the abundance, legacy and currency of images of black women, which Syms has previously described as a kind of surveillance system.

Syms' powerful installation design provides a lens through which to view fellow Los Angeles artist Frances Stark's large four-part painting *Black Flag (Basel)*, 2015 in the neighbouring room of the central gallery. Stark renders the American flag in black and white, tasselled and on a desk stand, both enlarged and at a domestic scale. In monochromatic colour, the flag itself appears to be mourning. At its right edge a miniature image of the cartoon character Nancy, with a sickened expression on her face and a hand on her stomach, stands in the spotlight. Stark couples this large painting with the low-fi video, *Poets on the Pyre*, 2015. The relative silence of the painting and Nancy's voice is juxtaposed with the 'noisy' pages of the artist's Instagram account – @therealstarkiller – in a diaristic account of a subject split between critical commentary, popular culture references and the banal. Like the figure of Nancy, who is shown aghast, the abundance of visual information in the video is contrasted with

deliberate word-lessness. The lack of text in this work is made all the more acute because of Stark's known use of written language.

The final room features three new sculptural works by Swiss-Iranian artist Shahryar Nashat from his series, *Start to Beg*, 2019–ongoing. The seven-foot-long, pink polymer and fiberglass abstract structures resemble recumbent bodies. These flesh-toned forms are installed in a wandering line, producing a processional feel as they appear to move alongside the three-dimensional display of Nashat's video work, *Image is an Orphan*, 2017. The video image plays on a large, 18-monitor screen bank, issuing a haunting monologue on human desire and digital image-making using made and found footage and computer-generated voice software. Nashat's screen and sculptural installation focuses our attention on the body's relationship with technologies that filter, fragment and distance intimacy, while generating desire and a connoting mortality.

Together, the works in *Honestly Speaking* revisit issues that were important catalysts for cultural politics in the 1980s – a time when the spectre of cybernetics attracted the popular imagination along with the notion of an 'artificial self' as a liberating space where bodies might be mutable and free. In the face of an increasingly enthralling and antagonistic digital world, the artists in *Honestly Speaking* use imaging technologies to create complex, diverse and intimate representations of the human subject.

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