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"Que Barbaro"

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Emily Sundblad, "Que Barbaro"
Albus Greenspon, New York
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On May 9th, 2011, Emily Sundblad sang for the opening of her first New York solo exhibition. Already known for her ancillary art world activities with the Reena Spaulings Fine Art gallery and her collaborative art work with Reena Spaulings, Grand Openings, Lee Williams, and others, this exhibition revealed her "solo voice." Previous collaborative endeavors focused on the vexed notion of the artist's subject position. Speculations about "artistic identity" have given essential axioms for her work with Reena Spaulings. In this regard, Sundblad's previous work is in close communion with that of Claire Fontaine and Bernadette Corporation, with whom the formal leitmotif of a fictional female pseudonym is shared. The assumption inherent in the work of all three is that the artist's position is dependent upon and defined by its social parameters. The creative space is simply that of the interactive or reflexive positioning. In these art practices, the manipulation of such positioning often takes place through text. It is here that the artistic "self" often finds its most satisfying formation. In the instance of Claire Fontaine, we hear that she "is young and playful because destroying rejuvenates her."¹ Or in the novelization by Bernadette Corporation of the "real life" of the dealer-artist Reena Spaulings, we are told that it is a "story about a nobody who could be anybody becoming a somebody for everybody."² These texts have often emphasized the subject's transformation under "late Capitalism." The influence of the French writing collective Tiqqun is here apparent. Tiqqun offered a theorization of the *Jeune-Fille* (young-woman) as a description of the new social relations engendered by innovations in advanced Capitalism. As Tiqqun describes in its "First Material for a Theory of the Jeune-Fille", "the Jeune-Fille is nothing but the *model-citizen* such as consumer society redefined it after World War One, in explicit response to the revolutionary menace."³ And despite the avowal of Tiqqun that the *Jeune-Fille* is not a gendered concept, it seems more than a coincidence that each of these groups took names appropriate for a young woman⁴.

1 Cf. www.Theimaginaryparty.com

2 *Reena Spaulings* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005).

3 *Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune Fille* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2001).

4 It should be said that Bernadette Corporation predates Reena Spaulings and Claire Fontaine by more than ten years, first being active around 1994. For this reason the name might have more to do with the type of identity appropriate to nightclub life, and one might look to the creative manifestations of "Jackie 60" as an interesting source of influence here

Considering such a background, what might Sundblad desire from her carefully orchestrated vocal display and the paintings that accompanied it? Foremost were the dilemmas and possibilities of authentic expression. Submitting to certain familiar structures of representation, Sundblad conducted her research with the help of composers, ensembles, set designers, gallerists, fashion designers, and even auction houses. The assistance of these individuals and institutions was at the level of transmission, enhancing and manipulating the simulacrum of the artist's effect. To fully elaborate, it might be beneficial to study the minutiae.

Working in conjunction with gallerist Amy Greenspon and prop stylist Matt Mazucca (who has worked on commercial photography for Ryan McGinley and Roe Etheridge, among others), Sundblad developed a simple interior. Folding chairs in a gold tone had been placed in rows at a 45 degree angle to the gallery walls. A huge piece of carpet covered the floor and a velvet curtain covered part of the wall and the large doorway to the gallery stock room. The space was lit with colored lights, bathing the usually white-washed gallery walls in an evocative array of red, blue, purple, and pink. The paintings by the artist became props or decoration, sharing the same or less intensity than the beautiful red lace dress worn by Sundblad, that had been custom made by Proenza Schouler especially for the event. In this arrangement of objects, there was a careful elaboration of a sensibility. The gold tone chairs and the dense lace of the artist's dress held a weight like the heavy musty smell of an old once-luxurious house. Like the paintings themselves, it was difficult to pinpoint an era. Stylistically familiar, yet not specifically retro, there was an ahistorical aspect that reminded one of the non-professional whose endeavors are often caught between the rearguard and the vanguard. A little out of step while still appearing of its time.

The composer Pete Drungle had orchestrated the music for the performance. Accompanying Sundblad on a black grand piano, Drungle led a seven-piece band that included four stringed instruments. This accompaniment offered an elaborate ground for Sundblad's raw vocals. With a haunting timbre, Sundblad sang love songs marked by pain, including a cover of Gram Parsons duet with Emmylou Harris called "Love Hurts." Oil on canvas paintings of varying size hung around the space of the gallery. They were vividly chromatic and painted in a loose gestural style. Often seemingly half-finished, they gave the impression of impassioned activity, emotional moments that had definitively passed. An enormous abstract canvas entitled "You Big Nothing" held swirls of mauve, orange, burned umber, yellow and rare smears of green. Its effect recalled the work of Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner, or even the teacher of the two latter artists, Hans Hoffman. Figurative works included a number of still life arrangements of flowers, a self-portrait, a large dark painting that portrayed a door, as well as a bright rendering of a classic yellow taxi cab. Each painting seemed to be intended as a memento with titles like *John McCracken*, *Adios* and *Oh Sweet Nothing*. A return visit two weeks after the opening found an evacuated

space, with only relics remaining. The chairs and audience, the musical instruments and their players, and the sense of excitement were gone. What remained were fragmentary reminders: the enormous carpet, the long velvet curtains, the colored lights which were diminished now by the normal gallery lighting, the red dress of the artist hung on the wall like a dead body, and of course the many paintings that now came to the fore.

In its evacuation, the exhibition's residual configuration seemed to evoke the reality of the art object. Here were multiple signs of expression. Touching in their failure, one had to recall the remarkable expressiveness of the artist's voice to assign to them the correct note of empathy. As a residual marker of the artist's vexed subject, the paintings did intimate a genuine pathos. What exactly might the "true" exhibition be? Should we ascribe this value to the performance? Would it be possible to locate somewhere here an "authentic expression"? Here we hit close to the contradictions of an expressive art. Within the vortex of representation, we find the ashes of experience, and these ashes seem very much to hold the obliterated fragments of the subject's various positioning. Representation contains a celebration or mourning for our psychological and physical encounters. This remains at the core of the artistic



*Because he's alone,
a sailor is always telling
himself who he is, 2011*

“experience.” And although direct transmission may remain a creative myth, its attempt and subsequent failure may well conjure illusions of the artist’s memorialized collisions.

In her performance and paintings, Sundblad indulges her own subject position. One could write of her artistic construction as a non-pseudonymous *Jeune-Fille*, in keeping with aspects of her artistic lineage. This would be too prescriptive though. The most successful of Sundblad’s works did not attempt to induce critique but rather invited themselves as testaments to be absorbed into the critical discourses at some later time. Whether Sundblad’s expressionism is to one’s taste is not necessarily of greatest interest. The most generous element of the work is also the most, almost stupidly, obvious. As the realm of body politics continues on its strange and intriguing course, the artwork is reaffirmed as a very unusual cypher or tool between the body and the fluxes of contemporary power relations. Somehow, Sundblad has given life to that greatest cliché of the artwork being the artist’s voice. Despite its critical complexities and seemingly conservative impulses, I believe that such a connection is essential for our moment. Sundblad helps make clear that the body is pivotal, once again, to a political art.



“Que Barbaro”, 2011,
Performance view