

frieze

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The *frieze* editorial team presents its highlights of the year.

Talk of shores, borders and the purity of language immediately brings to mind pressing global issues around nationalism and immigration. For his South London Gallery show earlier this year, 'Sic Glyphs', Michael Dean blocked the entrance to the gallery with chipboard and corrugated iron and filled the room with twisted forms in steel rebar, concrete and plastic, which sprouted dry weeds, reminiscent of an abandoned industrial estate or dockland. These sculptures, suggesting either human figures with peephole eyes, clenched fists, lolling tongues or cursive script, tracked the migration of language from speech to writing to the glyph and then into three dimensions. In this way, he drew attention to the fundamental instability of meaning – language, so central to identity, belongs to nobody and settles nowhere. Dean really did conjure some 'sic glyphs' – cool signs – with work that felt playful and politically urgent. — *Paul Clinton is associate editor of frieze and lives in London, UK.*

In a climate of revanchist populism and social upheaval, Nicole Eisenman's paintings, recently exhibited in a retrospective at the New Museum and a solo show at Anton Kern Gallery in New York, are celebrations of racial, sexual and gender difference. Eisenman's figurative painting demonstrates how now, more than ever, we need to see diverse bodies represented in our visual culture. — *Dan Fox is co-editor of frieze and lives in New York, USA.*

Mary Reid Kelley's latest film, *This is Offal* (2016), is set in a morgue; it tells the tale of a woman, who committed suicide, and her animated organs, in rhymed dialogue. It's Shana-Moulton-funny, Jim-Shaw-awkward and Tim-Burton-haunting.

Hiwa K is a Berlin-based artist who originates from the northern-Iraqi, Kurdish town of Sulaymaniyah. Via videos, sculptures, installations and performative works, he reflects on the recent history of war and trauma in the Middle East with musical humour and conceptual acuity. — *Jörg Heiser is co-editor of frieze and lives in Berlin, Germany.*

Jeremy Deller's *We Are Here* (2016) – a one-day living memorial across the UK to the young lives lost at the Battle of the Somme 100 years ago – was an almost unbearably moving tribute to a slaughtered generation. The depth and scope of Deller's creative activism shows no sign of abating. A different approach to the past, but no less moving: the young painter, Helen Johnson, creates urgent, beautiful canvases that intertwine Australian history with an hallucinogenic imagining of the present. Her exhibition, as part of Glasgow International earlier this year, was incredible: I can't wait to see what she comes up with next. — *Jennifer Higgle is co-editor of frieze and editor of Frieze Masters. She lives in London, UK.*

The US filmmaker Laura Poitras's documentary work about the Iraq War, surveillance and the importance of whistleblowers has never been more necessary. Her trilogy on post 9/11 politics – *My Country, My Country* (2006), *The Oath* (2010) and *CITIZENFOUR* (2014) – traces the most significant political developments of our century with both a journalistic immediacy and an intimate, humanizing lens. I am looking forward to her forthcoming film, *Risk*: a portrait of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, various journalists and activists. — *Christy Lange is curator of public programming and associate editor of frieze. She lives in Berlin, Germany.*

Josh Kline's immersive, dystopian installations, incorporating video and sculpture, examine the intersection between digital technology, politics and labour. *Freedom* (2015) – which was first seen in New York as part of last year's New Museum Triennial, and is currently on view at the Portland Art Museum – combines references to Occupy Wall Street, Barack Obama's inaugural address, the Iraq War and police killings to highlight the loss of our collective freedoms in the face of growing state and corporate surveillance. In his show at 47 Canal in New York earlier this year, Kline used an innovative range of materials to address income inequality: one of the most significant social and political issues of our time. — *Evan Moffitt is assistant editor of frieze and lives in New York, USA.*

Lucy Beech's *Pharmakon*, co-commissioned by this year's Liverpool Biennial and FACT, deepens the artist's exploration of 'emotional entrepreneurship', particularly as it relates to female empowerment and its fictions, and the ways in which networks of dependency and support are configured by late capitalism. *Pharmakon* is an incisive, absolutely contemporary film that feels more relevant than ever in Britain, where 'our' NHS is continually and insidiously used as political currency – and one all the more pleasing for its, perhaps unwitting, invocation of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983). — *Amy Sherlock is deputy editor of frieze and lives in London, UK.*

In London in January, I saw Marianna Simnett's first solo show at Seventeen. Her immersive installation, *Faint with Light* (2016), includes a recording of the artist fainting from self-induced hyperventilation – she is interested in the involuntary sound emitted by the body at the moment of unconsciousness – while a rack of strip lights projects a slowly accelerating strobe pattern. For those that know her films, such visceral intensity will not be a surprise; to experience it was something else altogether. — *Paul Teasdale is editor of frieze.com and lives in London, UK.*

It was a simple action – or, perhaps, inaction – but its repercussions were staggering. By closing Chisenhale Gallery for just over a month, and insisting its employees not work, the German artist Maria Eichhorn provoked more confusion, vitriol and debate than any other artist this year. *5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours* is a testament to the abiding significance of the conceptual; a testament to the importance of doing things a little differently. — *Harry Thorne is assistant digital editor of frieze and lives in London, UK.* ♦♦

Marianna Simnett

Blood oaths and bodies under threat

—
by Ben Eastham

That two audience members fainted during a recent screening of Marianna Simnett's videos at the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion in London was neither surprising nor incongruous. Far from disrupting the event, these instinctive responses to the sensory onslaught seemed entirely appropriate. (This interpretation was seemingly shared by the security guards, who were initially reluctant to clear space for what they assumed to be a choreographed intervention.) The physically unsettling combination of imagery and sound – alternately shocking, soothing, sickening – is typical of an artist whose work elevates sense over speculation; by the end of an evening in which a trilogy of shorts was stitched together by live music and performance, I was equal parts exhilarated and exhausted.

Across *The Udder* (2014), *Blood* (2015) and *Blue Roses* (2015), the body – its digestive tracts, nasal passages and circulatory networks, respectively – provides the setting for a series of grim morality tales played out by a motley crew of children, cyborg cockroaches, sworn virgins and disembodied limbs. In each, we are transported directly into a biological system – whether human or animal – under threat of infection, disease or disorder. (Readers might be reminded of the sci-fi classic *Fantastic Voyage*, 1966, in which scientists on board a miniaturized submarine fight pitched battles with rogue blood cells, germs and assorted viruses.) This narrative is interleaved with a second story – set outside the body – with characters and themes carried across the two scenarios.

Much of *The Udder* – with which Simnett won the Jerwood/Film and Video Umbrella Award in 2014 – takes place inside a cow's mammary gland, its four sections separated by translucent screens of crimson gauze. Children flit around its quarters, the violent psychodrama of their sibling relations adding to the prevailing sense of menace. (Two young brothers excitedly conspire to 'cut [their sister] up [...] dismantle her into a million bits so that she can never be rebuilt' while the udder itself is threatened by mastitis, a common infection.) The central protagonist, a young girl, is forbidden from venturing outside the udder for risk of inviting 'contamination'; at the Serpentine, a white-clad Greek chorus introduced the video with a haunting refrain: 'Come inside, outside isn't safe, it will hurt you.'

An oath of chastity is posited as the most effective defence against contagion; authority figures obsess over hygiene in an effort to maintain a strict boundary between the internal and external worlds. As one collapses into the other, we are left to make our own allegorical interpretations.

When we meet in her Deptford studio, Simnett talks about her determination to tether the political and the ideological to embodied experience. Influenced in her early work by the body politics of feminism's 'second wave' (she shows me sketchbooks filled with homages to Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman), her work proposes that we situate the body at the centre of debates about society and the self which are increasingly preoccupied with immaterial networks and non-corporeal identities. In *Blood*, we accompany the young girl from *The Udder* to Albania to stay with a 'sworn virgin': a woman who has taken an oath to remain chaste (vows, promises and pledges are recurring themes) in order to live as a man. She tells us that, in her society, 'a girl can choose to become a man to escape marriage or simply for a better life. But there is one condition: you must promise to remain a virgin for the rest of your life! And if you ever break the promise, it can only be repaid with your blood.'

The story of the girl's induction into society is entwined with another that, at first, seems unrelated, and which begins with the surgical removal of two bones from the lining of her nose. Having been cut out, these two turbinate bones are personified as spurned friends who exact revenge by gnawing indignantly on a giant, bloodied, papier-mâché proboscis. The two stories – one dramatizing a set of social relations, the other a crisis in the body – bleed into each other.

The notion that abstract values such as justice are insured by the body is so old as to be idiomatic in English – we demand a 'pound of flesh', make 'blood oaths' and insist that 'heads will roll' – but Simnett makes the link queasily explicit by splicing narrative of the making and breaking of promises with images of excision, dissection and amputation. When the sworn virgin tells us that 'breaking the oath will cause shame and endless bloodshed', for example, her speech is overlaid by footage of invasive surgery. (Simnett's work is 'surrealist' in the manner of *Un*

Chien Andalou (1929), cutting abruptly between images to foster nightmarish associations.)

A classically trained musician, Simnett also exploits the capacity of music to 'act upon the body' by leavening her videos with perversely catchy but nonetheless sinister ditties on such subjects as mastitis, turbinate bones and varicose veins, a neat *détournement* of the way in which adults instill normative values in children through the back door of nursery rhyme. The body is thus the medium through which the work is experienced, as much as that through which it is expressed, and Simnett works upon her audience's emotions to effect a kind of catharsis.

Indeed, the artist's commitment to the principle that ideas must be felt extends to her working process. In *Blue Roses* she recites a monologue about blood while suspended upside down by her knees from a horizontal bar, maintaining the position almost to the point of passing out. Her head is filled with blood, she says to camera; the literal and metaphorical uses of language align. In a pivotal work made in 2012, while she was still a student at the Slade, Simnett cuts documentation of the story of her grandfather – who survived a mass execution during the Holocaust because he lost consciousness and collapsed as the gunmen opened fire – with close-ups of herself hyperventilating. At the conclusion of the video she succeeds in cutting off the flow of oxygen to the brain and buckles sickeningly to the floor, audibly cracking her head. The video is called *Faint*.

Ben Eastham is a writer and editor based in London, UK. He is co-founder and editor of The White Review, and the co-author, with Katya Tylevich, of My Life as a Work of Art (Laurence King, 2016).

Marianna Simnett lives and works in London. She was awarded the Jerwood/Film and Video Umbrella Award (2014-15), the Adrian Carruthers Award (2013) and the William Coldstream Prize (2013). In 2015, she had a solo exhibition at Comar, Isle of Mull, UK, a solo performance at Serpentine Gallery, London, and was included in group shows at CAC, Shanghai, China; Connecting Spaces, Hong Kong; Jerwood Space, London; and CCA, Glasgow, UK. Her video, Blue Roses (2015), is at the Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK, until 28 March.



In Simnett's work, the body — its digestive tracts, nasal passages and circulatory networks — provides the setting for grim morality tales.

1
Blue Roses,
2015, video still

2
The Udder,
2014, video still

3
Blood,
2015, video still

Courtesy
1 the artist
and Comar •
2 & 3 the artist and
the Jerwood/
FVU Awards



2

