

La femme de nulle part

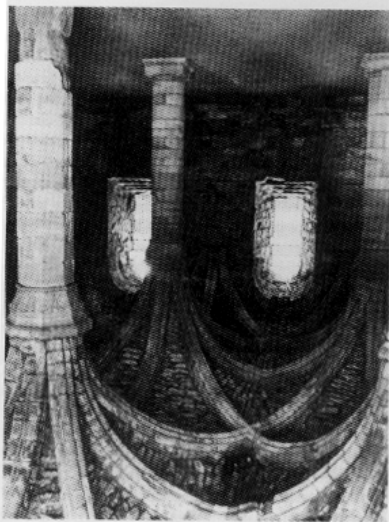
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'La femme de nulle part' is a show that, at its heart, is about the theatre and performance, a meditation on the space between reality and constructed narrative.

Curated by Glasgow-based artist Lucy Skaer, the exhibition brings together work by Anita Di Bianco, Sophie Macpherson and Rosalind Nashashibi. Di Bianco comes first, with *Disaffection and Disaffection*, 2004, a film based on Jean Genet's play *The Maids*, and starring – if that's the right word – Skaer and fellow artist Hanneline Visnes.

In Genet's telling of the story of the Papin sisters, who brutally murdered their employer and her daughter, identities are blurred in the near-sadomasochistic ritual rehearsals of the

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murders carried out by the two sisters. Di Bianco blurs boundaries further, having her players address each other by their real names, regardless of which role they are playing, and dispensing with a third actress to play the maids' mistress, allowing the play-acting within the play to bleed into this version of it.

For all that it is based on a piece of theatre, Di Bianco's film is inherently anti-theatrical. Unlike Christopher Miles' 1974 film adaptation, with its static camerawork and lavish mise en scène, *Disaffection and Disaffection* is shot almost entirely in close-up, the camera relentlessly hovering over shoulders and homing in on faces.

Skaer and Visnes are artists, of course, not actors, and their performances make for difficult viewing, with Pinter-length pauses as the pair struggle to recall lines, rather than for dramatic effect. This is, it seems safe to assume, a deliberate tactic. The claustrophobic filming, the dud performances, the confusion of already confused identities all combine to make *Disaffection and Disaffection* not a staging or adaptation of Genet's work, and not simply a crude bid to evoke in the viewer a pale emotional imitation of the maids' claustrophobic mania, but an essay on the play's themes expressed through a skewed rendering of it: commentary as performance, performance as commentary.

Di Bianco's second piece, *Studies for J.*, 2007, is a sketch or rehearsal for a proposed film about Joan of Arc, itself taking the form of a film. A woman paces around a room, reciting texts on the martyr. Those texts range from speeches made at the trial of Louis XVI to the first volume of Bob Dylan's memoirs, lighting on e e cummings and Montesquieu along the way. At the centre of the piece, though, is Carl Theodor Dreyer's script for his 1928 silent masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, which

reveals Di Bianco's rather contrary approach to her filmic sources. Where *Disaffection and Disaffection* exchanges the stillness of Miles' direction for frenetic, intrusive close-up, *Studies for J.* responds to Dreyer's work by excising the passion from his passion play, and reversing his focus on full-frame facial expression by having the camera loop languidly around the reader, dwelling on the set as much as the actor.

Between Di Bianco's pair of engrossing, provocative film works sit Sophie Macpherson's quiet, unassuming sculptures and works on paper. The relationship between Di Bianco's moving images and Macpherson's static explorations is, though, immediately clear. The space is dominated by an untitled gunmetal-grey construction that rises from floor to ceiling, its right-angled sides bisected by a curved shelf. Behind it sits *Black Herringbone Screen*, echoing its basic form in miniature, with regularly spaced chevrons marking its interior surface. These two simple, restrained pieces, twin stages enclosing the absence of actors, point to Macpherson's investigation of theatrical themes.

Other works are more explicit, and step beyond the theatre toward other modes of performance. *Apparatus*, 2007, consists of a card table without its top, its crossed legs painted canary yellow, and a black box laid on its side, as if a street conjuror has been chased from the scene. *Interlocking Coins*, 2007, looks like an attempt to explain the magic behind that absent conjuror's con trick, with hundreds of one-penny coins studding the surface of linked wooden discs. A drawing, *Figure in Ruff*, 2007, shows an androgynous figure in contemporary clothing, save for the ruff of the work's title, entering a world of make-believe through a simple act of transformation.

In among Macpherson's work hang two photographs by Rosalind Nashashibi, taken from a four-part series, 'Untitled (Abbey)', 2005, which invert images from a study of 12th-century Cistercian architecture. It is tempting to gather Nashashibi's photographs into the theatrical fold – perhaps the upside-down ecclesiastical architecture is a comment on the performance inherent in religious ritual, perhaps the grinning faces formed by the upturned arches are meant to hint at the sock and buskin masks of tragedy and comedy – but, ultimately, they seem out of place, unconnected, an afterthought.

This broken link is a surprise. Aside from the awkward appearance of Nashashibi's photographs, Skaer's curation is taut, even witty. Whispers of dialogue from Di Bianco's films are allowed to bleed into Macpherson's empty set, a subtle means of highlighting the potential narratives held in the latter's work, and the mounting of the work is bluntly confrontational, with visitors whisked straight from the Edinburgh streets into the immersive world of *Disaffection and Disaffection*.

There is a sense, too, that Skaer has approached the show as she might approach a piece of her own work, adding a quiet treatise on collaboration to the show's more obvious themes, from her appearance in Di Bianco's film to the seemingly forced inclusion of Nashashibi, with whom Skaer has worked closely in the past.

There is something of a problem with 'La femme de nulle part', though. Macpherson's work suggests the possibility of imagined narratives, but falls short of prompting such imaginings in the viewer, and Di Bianco's films are satisfying, but in a

Rosalind Nashashibi
Untitled (Abbey 1) 2005
photograph

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cool, academic sense; they are about drama, but never dramatic. This is a show that fairly fizzles with ideas, then, but while those ideas linger in the memory, the work itself does not – to twist a term from the theatre, 'La femme de nulle part' never quite breaks the fourth wall. ■

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