

Oreet Ashery: Animal with a Language

tt thisistomorrow.info/articles/oreet-ashery-animal-with-a-language

Oreet Ashery: Animal with a Language

Waterside Contemporary, London

18 September – 13 December 2014

Review by Will Gresson

Although an interdisciplinary artist, Oreet Ashery is most commonly known for her performance work, which often incorporates interactive or participatory elements, and has been noted for its vast array of venues and locations. 'Animal with a Language', currently on show at Waterside Contemporary, is a reflection of her object-based practice while still referencing previous performance works and actions, and it is also the artist's first solo exhibition in London.

Within the gallery itself, the image of the pig serves perhaps as one of the strongest touchstones to understanding the artist's multifaceted work, which is highly frenetic and fiercely engaged with politics, gender and class. The animal is a link to her recent project, 'Party For Freedom', and appears in this exhibition in several forms: a black pig jutting out halfway up a wall, a silhouette of a pig snout on golden card, a video work where a woman lies relaxed with an apple in her mouth while a stereotypically measured BBC voiceover discusses the bureaucracy surrounding the culling of pigs in British farms. The floor and part of the walls of the gallery are also painted a pig-flesh toned pink. The animal is a metaphor for Ashery's engagement with Vladimir Myakovsky's 1921 play 'Mystery-Bouffe', a biting satire concerning two groups, "The Clean" and "The Unclean".

In the play, the world is flooding. The Unclean, made up of typically proletarian workers, build a boat to save themselves. The Clean, a clear stand in for the bourgeoisie, lack the skills to do the same and beg refuge on the boat. Once aboard, they proceed to eat all the stored up food and generally take their rescuers for granted, until they are eventually thrown overboard. Written in 1921, the play directly reflects the mantra of the early years of the Soviet Union. This dichotomy of the clean and unclean, and the presence and role of the underclass, is central to Ashery's work. The costumes, which fill the centre of the gallery space, are made up of domestic materials like rubber gloves and dishcloths. Lines from the play including "the world is flooding" are written in large letters across them. In 'Party for Freedom', the rise of the right wing with its strongly xenophobic, anti-immigration overtones is central, and this image of the immigrant or foreigner as animal is equally important in 'Animal with a Language'.

While viewable as a stand-alone show, a background knowledge of Ashery's other recent projects undoubtedly opens the works here up to a greater range of interpretation and readings. Appropriately enough, it may be Mayakovsky's instruction that "in the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading or publishing Mystery-Bouffe should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute" that provides the most interesting link with Ashery's work. Her political and social engagement is with issues which are ongoing, or as the artist herself put it in an interview in 'The Wire' earlier this year, "I was looking at that idea of the unfinished revolution. Things like race, things like gender, all these things that were fought over – we're still so far away from getting anyway near being liberated in that way." 'Animal with a Language' serves as a new edition in a much longer campaign of struggle and negotiation.
