

BODY AND SCREEN

An Essay by Julie Wills

The works selected for Body and Screen, at a most basic level, incorporate an artist intentionally performing for the camera's lens. Whether explicitly or tacitly, in each instance the performer also acknowledges the camera's presence, lending a self-awareness that ranges from the shy to the confrontational. Most of these works implicate the viewer as an active observer of some internal or self-made struggle, disrupting the viewer's expectation for detached or passive contemplation. The artists included here are aware simultaneously of their medium's unique possibilities for self-presentation and of their own power to disrupt the expected conventions of a ubiquitous cultural form.



As the dominant theme in the presented works, struggle permeates the exhibit as a whole. The performers in these works can be seen wrestling with invisible forces or self-constructed obstacles, working through absurd challenges, or attempting to defy laws of physics. Both visual and auditory cues offer evidence of intense effort or physical duress.

Kate Gilmore's two presented video works show the artist punching, kicking, and shoving her way through a physical obstacle. In *Standing Here*, she first breaks into and then climbs out of a drywall box, while in *Wallflower*, she breaks a hole in a dry-wall floor through which she then forces an assortment of oversized furniture items.

In both cases, the need for this activity seems to be of her own making, though this does not lessen the physical force required of their completion. Nonetheless, the artist tempers the viewer's natural inclination toward concern; in *Standing Here*, what feels like a confined and claustrophobic space is defused by the artist having broken into this space in the first place. In *Wallflower*, both action and result are displayed simultaneously through the use of a divided screen, eliminating the viewer's anxiety over outcome.

Adan De La Garza presents a variety of inane and seemingly self-imposed tasks using banal materials. Each creates either frustration or some danger for the performer, who can be seen shooting staples from a staple gun at balloons attached to an oscillating fan, or sitting cross-legged surrounded by a ring of mousetraps before pouring out a bin of rubber balls. Anticipation of pain or injury is frequently seen on the performer's face, though the actual risk in most cases has more to do with temporary displeasure than lasting physical harm. This in turn generates a tension in the viewer, whose voyeuristic role is cast somewhere between sadist and negligent babysitter.

Wura-Natasha Ogunji's use of struggle is emphasized by her treatment of the video medium itself, using stop-animation editing to defy gravitational pull. In *The Epic Crossings of an Ife Head*, the artist as performer appears first on a distant horizon before moving toward the camera's position, while appearing never to touch the ground. This figure appears always in mid-leap, with the associated gestures of an Olympic long-jumper whose grunts and audible exertions are the only sounds to break the video's ongoing technological drone. The performer does finally alight at the camera's position, locating the viewer at the point of the struggle's metaphoric end.

The artists in Body and Screen acknowledge the camera's voyeuristic presence in ways that range from overt interaction to coy disdain; in each case, the camera serves to locate the viewer's physical position in relation to the performer. At times, the presence of the camera creates a bizarre interplay of exposure and modesty, wherein the artist sets up vulnerability but also controls the eventual level of display. Kate Gilmore gives more to chance, her prom dress hiked up above her waist as she slides through her self-made floor hole in *Wallflower*. In *Nexus*, Tatiana Svrckova cuts away the fabric of her own garment in an area surrounding her belly, only to reveal a beige-colored elastic undergarment obscuring the expected navel and corresponding auto-exposure.

While the artist in each work is engaged in a performative action, Body and Screen remains after all a video exhibit. Variations in production techniques remind the viewer of video's material qualities, keeping these works from slipping into the realm of mere performance documentation.

Video-specific devices such as the dual or split screen are used to show simultaneous activity in works by Gilmore, Svrckova, and Tobias Fike and Matthew Harris, generating an experience for the viewer that could not be had while watching a live performance. Gilmore presents two separate locations side by side, and Svrckova presents two sequential actions concurrently. Fike and Harris, in their collaborative work, *Pushmepullyou*, use the dual screen to suggest a shared struggle between the two performers while also limiting the viewer's visual range to encompass only their heads and shoulders, the source of the struggle remaining unknown.

In De La Garza's works, the video production quality is high enough as to contrast with the banality of his actions and materials, lending visual elegance even to his wind-up chattering teeth. Ogunji's use of stop-animation and audio elevates her works beyond their performed possibilities and highlights video's ultimately technological character.

The artist-performers in Body and Screen set up a range of interactions with their implied viewers, but through their intentional use of the camera, each acknowledges and implicates the viewer in an only partially controlled scenario. That is, the viewer's response remains an unpredictable element in each work's interaction or negotiation. Ultimately, the viewer is left to ponder his or her own position in relation to the artist's performance motives, whether psychological, sociocultural, or otherwise.



Julie Wills is an interdisciplinary visual and performance artist with a background and active interest in art theory and aesthetics. Her educational background includes the completion of an MFA from the University of Colorado and an MA in art criticism from the University of Montana. In addition to her individual studio practice, she has worked since 2004 as one of four members of The Bridge Club collaborative, alongside artists Annie Strader, Christine Owen and Emily Bivens. Wills lives and works in a rural area outside of Gunnison, Colorado.