

Mika Rottenberg *Dough*

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In Mika Rottenberg's world, every woman is a superhero. Although each woman is ordinary enough to be modest, every one has an extraordinary characteristic, allowing her just enough pride to do her part with dignity. And in Rottenberg's world, these skills are recognized and deployed.

Why they are deployed, however, is not quite certain. The characters in Rottenberg's videos work on assembly lines, endlessly repeating specific tasks. But rather than manufacturing ordinary products, theirs are superfluous, even bizarre. Labour is exerted but nothing ever really changes, like churning water, but with lipstick and a uniform on. Rottenberg's work lies somewhere between Fischli & Weiss and Matthew Barney.

In Rottenberg's world, women are nurturers, but they care for material rather than people. Their toil is yoked by industry, hardly a new condition for women, whose grace under boredom has been refined through centuries of monotonous drudgery. But these women are not your average assembly-line housemaids; they are freakish and empowered. Their strength and individuality defy objectification by the camera's gaze.

A case in point is *Dough*, Rottenberg's newest work, recently shown at Nicole Klagsbrun in New York. In it the tears of an obese black woman are inexplicably involved in a dough-rising process. A gigantic chunk of dough is stretched and manipulated by four women along an assembly line that cuts through a multi-chamber structure. The corpulent allergy-prone woman is the first to handle the dough. A skinny older white woman with very long fingers cuts fresh flowers that are brought by pulley to the fat woman. As she sniffs the flowers, a tear runs down her cheek, continues down her leg, and is funneled into a hose that spouts it out onto a pile of dough, which was cut from the larger chunk. The morsel with a tear rises and is shrink-wrapped and tossed into a bin.

The video is presented in a wooden construct that mimics the interior of the "factory" complete with soundboard ceiling. It looks like a stage set with a lemonade-stand aesthetic. Its artificiality lets the viewer know it is a construction, all in jest, meant for our entertainment. But what is parodied? Industrialism? Capitalism? The commodity fetish? Is self-sustenance futile? Is women's labour simply superfluous?

In such carefully constructed pieces everything is intentional. So why dough? Why would anyone want a shrink-wrapped piece of raw dough with a tear? Is this a bakery gone completely mad, forgetting about bread entirely? Is the dough a literal play on "dough" as in slang for money? Surely it is, but it is also a surrogate for flesh. It mimics in texture the hands that manipulate it, but especially the obese woman's "leavened" body. The women in *Dough* are selling themselves. Not in a sexual way, although there is an erotic element to the piece; they are simply part of the capitalist system, where bodies are reified and hold value only in their ability to produce.

And what of the tears, that traditionally symbolize pain, but here they are caused by hothouse flowers? Perhaps it is the artificiality of the flowers, their safekeeping under plastic that is sad. The emotionally numb woman does not cry because she is fat, nor because she is working for minimum wage; the tear is *artificially* induced. We know it is important because this tear, excluding the dough, is repeated mechanically in front of the video installation. Drops drip from the ceiling, via a hose like the one in the video, onto a heated linoleum tile on the floor that immediately sizzles away each tear. The sizzling sound is repeated in an audio work that greets the visitor at the entrance to the gallery. Here the tear is wasted away rather than taken advantage of in a productive, albeit puzzling, process.

Included in the exhibition are three large drawings. They are also expressions of Rottenberg's interests in production lines, capitalist economies, and circular systems. But unlike her videos, Rottenberg's drawings are not funny. In fact, they seem angry, perhaps due to the hard pencil markings with which they were made. They map out intricate systems that include mouths, boxes, plants, flying insects and other cryptic symbols. Some of the mouths are vomiting

into the boxes. Some of the flying insects, although they could be birds or small machines, seem to be attracted to the boxes, or cesspools. This implies a symbiotic relationship built upon systematic regurgitation, which is what much of Rottenberg's work is about.

Rottenberg pits the commodification of the body versus the resilience of the soul. Using humour she highlights the futility of commercial sustainability. She examines the Marxist notion of alienation through a feminist lens and by doing so questions capitalist "reification."

-Chen Tamir