

2015

Synaesthetics

Moser, Gabrielle

Suggested citation:

Moser, Gabrielle (2015) Synaesthetics. *Canadian Art*, 31 (4). p. 116. ISSN 0825-3854 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1131/>

BY GABRIELLE MOSER

You smell Aleesa Cohene's videos before you see them. At her solo show at Oakville Galleries' Gairloch Gardens location this past fall, cleverly titled "I Know You Know," it was a blend of spicy herbs, reminiscent of sacred spaces and religious ceremonies, that hit first, followed by another, more pungent note beneath that. Emanating from a pile of 1,500 onyx grapes tangled on the floor in the corner of one room, the scent is both appealing and repellent. Next to it, a beautifully woven kilim prayer rug is laid out in front of the room's fireplace. Perfectly spotlit, it seems to emit music, a meandering line of plucked string instruments that build over a cinematic soundscape, punctuated by the occasional sounds of footfalls and panting breathing. In the adjoining room, on a hanging screen, a video shows a woman getting into her car, listening to a cassette tape (the same soundtrack played by the carpet) and walking into an office. Through headphones, placed on a low leather Barcelona bench in front of the screen, we hear a dialogue begin between the woman on screen—a therapist—and her unseen patient, while beside us on the bench, a lined notepad, standard-issue for filmic therapists everywhere, records three handwritten words: "rabbit, ass, freedom."

This synesthetic experience, the feeling of smelling what you are seeing, or hearing a texture you want desperately to reach out and touch, is typical of Cohene's work. Her practice combines video, sound, scent and, more recently, sculpture, painting and dance, in seductively tactile installations. Over the last 10 years, the Vancouver-born, Berlin- and Toronto-based artist has made a name for herself through her deft manipulation of found film footage and her immersive viewing environments. Working with the precision of a film editor, Cohene mines the emotional substrata of Hollywood cinema,

Aleesa Cohene *Hate You*
(with Zanette Singh) 2014
Video and notepads
8 min. INSTALLATION VIEWS
AT OAKVILLE GALLERIES
PHOTOS TONI HAFKENSCHIED



SYNAESTHETICS

Aleesa Cohene fuses the senses



At the centre of her practice is what she calls the composite, a method of editing together hundreds of clips of actors into a single integrated character.

concentrating on the micro-gestures of actors—their sighs, wry smiles and surreptitious glances—to build nuanced characters and environments that are as hypnotic as her source material.

At the centre of her practice is what she calls the composite, a method of editing together hundreds of clips of actors into a single integrated character who moves and speaks as one. In Cohene's installations, monitors operate as characters, speaking to one another, fighting with one another, and even falling in (or out of) love with one another. Using clips of individual actors, playing individual characters, but assembling them into a seamless flow of imagery, her videos pull the viewer in with their immediate familiarity, but keep us watching because of the ways they undo the narratives we have come to expect from film.

In *Like, Like* (2009), for instance, two monitors play out the end of a love affair between two women: one despondently walking through her home and front porch, the other desperately trying to stage a reconciliation. Culling scenes from films of the 1970s and '80s, a period that coincides with Cohene's childhood, *Like, Like* includes instantly recognizable faces, such as those of Diane Keaton, Susan Sarandon, Kathy Bates and Meryl Streep, alongside less placeable but still familiar actresses. But these celebrities are never playing themselves. Instead, Cohene uses their performances to construct unique characters, staging encounters that would never be possible in a standard Hollywood storyline. In a way, nothing really happens in *Like, Like*: there is no rising action or climactic confrontation, only the emotional aftershocks of a relationship that has already ended. In the gallery, a melancholic soundtrack, composed by Cohene's collaborator, Isabelle Noël; a nebulizer often hidden behind the monitors that releases a floral scent; and a painted environment mimicking the stripes of a fabric swing set one character sits on complete the immersive environment.

However, there is more to Cohene's works than their constituent parts. The first time I saw *Like, Like*, I was entranced by it: fixed to the spot between its two central protagonists, I both wanted their love affair to be redeemed and desperately hoped their cycle of love, loss and failed reconciliation would never end. To watch Cohene work with this well-worn Hollywood material is to feel you are learning to watch movies all over again, seeing an entirely new narrative unfold across films you thought you knew. As a child of the 1980s, the same generation as Cohene, I am reminded of some of my formative spectatorial experiences, where, watching storylines I could not quite follow, I invented plots of my own. *Like, Like* is a testament to the generative pleasures of being a spectator, but it is one that is also politically savvy. To focus in on the female characters of Hollywood cinema is to build two characters who must—by virtue of the roles they are given—be contained by the domestic space of the home: singing in the bathtub, talking on the telephone, sitting on porch swings, perpetually waiting for something to happen. (It is also to see just how white and middle-class Hollywood's female protagonists are: a point not lost on Cohene.)

Recombining found footage from Hollywood and made-for-TV movies is not a new tactic. It draws on historical precedents as far back as the Surrealists' use of collage, or, more recently, the appropriation strategies of the Pictures Generation photographers. And, ever since the blockbuster debut of *The Clock* (2010), a virtuosic 24-hour film that compiles thousands of clips of clocks from cinema, played in real time, comparisons between Cohene's approach and Christian Marclay's are inevitable. Yet what distinguishes Cohene's work from these artists is her valuation of the spectator's affective responses to film above all else. For her, film is not simply a historical archive to draw on, nor a commercial commodity to critique, but an active subject in and of itself: one that might offer us a way to tell different stories and histories than those we have inherited.

Alternate histories are the focus of Cohene's *Yes, Angel* (2011), a four-channel video installation that tells the story of two intergenerational queer relationships unfolding during and in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis. Completed for "Coming After," a group show at the Power Plant that surveyed the work of a generation of artists who had come of age after the politically galvanizing moment of 1980s queer activism, *Yes, Angel* deploys the same emotional melodrama that drives *Like, Like*, but uses it to think about how personal relationships both shaped, and were shaped by, political identities. A modern fairy tale told by an unseen narrator frames the footage of the two couples, hinting at the ways queer histories—and the complex feelings they produce—are transferred from older generations to younger ones.

While Cohene's earlier works sometimes made the spectator feel like a voyeur onto an intimate relationship, her new works draw us into the action, offering us a seat in the therapist's office. Comprised of two video installations depicting two different therapy sessions, "I Know You Know" takes psychoanalysis as the inspiration for its format, but the dialogue that unfolds between the therapist (or analyst) and patient (analysand) also concerns itself with one of psychoanalysis's fundamental questions: the problem of freedom—our desire for it, and the complicated, sometimes violent, repercussions of attaining and exercising it. In the first video, *Hate You* (2014), a female analyst appears on screen, reacting to and conversing with her female patient, who is represented only through the audio track provided by a pair of headphones. The second set of videos, *That's Why We End* (2012–14), show the same composite female analyst, this time treating a male patient who struggles to remember a recent dream. In both scenarios, the viewer is being asked to take the position of the analysand: to not just submerge ourselves into Cohene's cinematic narrative, but to relate to it as another composite character.

Association, another foundation of psychoanalytic thinking, is central to how Cohene has constructed these therapeutic exchanges. Most aspects of the project, from the patients' dialogues (improvised by Cohene's friends in response to her montage of scenes) through to the sculptural objects that seem to have been extruded from the video clips, were based on an

Aleesa Cohene *That's Why We End* (with Eric Cazdyn) (detail) 2012–14 Three-channel video, Mart Stam armchairs, notepads, pyrite, dress shirts, bowtie and scent (ambrette seed, cucumber, grass, neroli, orange flower blossom and tomato stems) Video: 20 min overall

associative method. In *Hate You*, for instance, an apple picked up and bitten by the on-screen analyst is interpreted as a grape by the patient, who in response opens a bag of chips and begins to eat them. Grapes reappear twice more in the show, once in the pile of scented onyx grapes, and again in *I Know You Know* (2014), with its audio recording of painter Brad Phillips instructing Cohene on how to recreate a landscape painting that appears in one of the video works (as well as on the gallery wall): a pedagogical exchange lasting 12 hours (only two and a half are presented in the exhibition) in which Phillips opens and drinks countless cans of Grape Crush soda.

Following Cohene down these rabbit holes of association requires a great deal of trust, and patience, on the part of the viewer. But the engagement draws our attention to the associative leaps we make whenever we immerse ourselves in cinema. Given her rigorous editing methods, it is perhaps also an allegory for her trajectory as an artist. "The previous work was a very tight, linear system applied to a distinct archive of material," she explains. Though those systems were vital to helping her compose the affective narratives of *Like, Like* and *Yes, Angel*. During her master's degree in the visual studies program at the University of Toronto, Cohene found herself feeling hemmed in by her editing rules. She began thinking about how to move past these restrictions, and found a solution in her own grad-school reading.

Looking beyond her usual source materials (movies she saw or could have seen as a child), the new works draw from the catalogue of films mentioned in Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema* books from the mid-1980s, a list of more than 230 movies that the French theorist often wrote about from memory, sometimes mistaking details or recalling the wrong character or dialogue from his time in the movie house. Cohene immediately saw the links between Deleuze's idiosyncratic research process and the tenets of psychoanalysis, where the patient's memories and associations, however partial, can be interpreted as symptoms of larger, unconscious psychic processes. Deleuze's approach to film is in many ways mimicked by Cohene's, insisting that our interpretations of cinema are just as—or perhaps even more—significant than the script's original intent. Working in this way not only allowed Cohene a greater variety of found footage to work with, but also freed her to experiment with media outside of the screen, producing sculptures, a painting and even choreographing a dance piece performed throughout the run of the exhibition. "Trying things I've never done before, like making a painting, became a theme for this body of work without me realizing it," she says.

ARTS



Then, among the Hollywood starlets, and the references to French film theory and psychoanalysis, there are always elements of Cohene's installations that are distinctly personal. Her scents, for instance, are custom-made combinations based on her own smell memories. The nebulizer in *Like, Like* contains, among its ingredients, amber, bergamot, black pepper, Lenor "April Fresh" fabric softener, neroli and a smell derived from a tiny patch of Cohene's childhood security blanket. In *You, Dear* (2014), the enormous cluster of onyx grapes at Oakville Galleries, it is the Smell of Real Ass™—a specialty scent Cohene learned of from a friend in Japan—that provides the acrid undertone to a combination of cumin, cyprus, frankincense and aluminum. "Every detail has to be accounted for," she says. "The goal is to overwhelm the [viewer's] senses in order to make sense of them."

Though we might not know at first what it is we are smelling, or seeing, or hearing, in Cohene's installations, there is no doubt that the layered narratives leave us transfixed. ■

THIS ISSUE



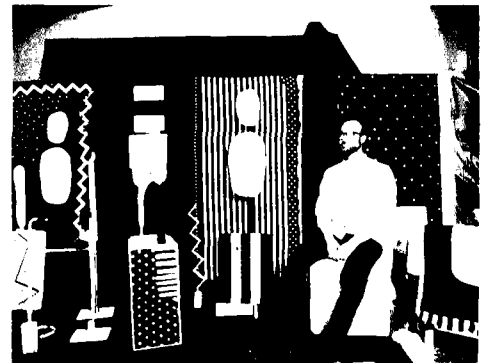
RICHARD RHODES, Editor

a special—and eloquent—expertise on ephemerality and ad hoc narrative. This is why after his recent “The Story of Stripes and Dots (Chapter 7)” was presented in Toronto this past winter, we asked novelist and journalist David Macfarlane to think about writing a profile of Taylor as an art-world colleague in narrative. The result is here for you to read, and the story opens with a terrific photograph of Taylor in his Brussels studio by UK photographer Natalie Hill. Hill makes it as clear as Macfarlane does that dots and stripes and Taylor’s art in general are very much a human story at human scale.

David Macfarlane travels to Brussels to visit Zin Taylor on page 120.
PHOTO NATALIE HILL

The last time we touched base with Zin Taylor in the mid-2000s, he had finished a documentary project on Martin Kippenberger’s *METRO-Net* subway, or at least what remained of Kippenberger’s global subway project in Dawson City, Yukon. Here was a work with mythic fascination about one of the dominant figures in contemporary art in the 1990s, and also a work with a sense of humour about what it means for an artist to build an identity within that legacy. Other exhibitions followed that showed equally intense engagements with the kind of pyrrhic object-making that Kippenberger exemplified and that Taylor has since made his own kind of specialty. In “Who Named the Days?” at Jessica Bradley Gallery in 2007, Taylor built what seemed a frail maquette of civic space, replete with tiered performance platforms populated with standing monoliths and one notable gibbet. It could have been a depressive vision of the Toronto art scene, especially in tandem with the video *White Pearl Sunshine Summoning Charm*, which showed a luminous white globe afloat in a stagnant garden pool. Since then, and after a move to Brussels, other projects and exhibitions have increasingly revealed Taylor to be honing

UNNOTICED TRUTHS



Contributors



MOSEY

MOSURINJOHN

MACFARLANE

LUO

SANADER

GABRIELLE MOSER is a writer, educator and curator based in Toronto. She regularly contributes to *Artforum* online, and her writing has appeared in venues including *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Fillip*, *Photography & Culture* and the *Journal of Visual Culture*. She has curated exhibitions for Access Gallery, Gallery TPW, Xspace and Vtape. Moser holds a PhD in art history and visual culture from York University and teaches at OCAD University.

SHARDAY MOSURINJOHN is a PhD candidate in cultural studies at Queen’s University, where she has taught art history, philosophy and religious studies. Her research explores the relationship between boredom, choice overload and our experience of time in contemporary life through vignettes about visual and material culture, including drawing and instant-messaging practices. She recently published articles in *The International Journal of the Image* and *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*.

DAVID MACFARLANE’s first book, *The Danger Tree* (1991/2014), won the Canadian Authors’ Association award for non-fiction. Under the title *Come From Away*, it was published to acclaim in both the UK and US. His novel *Summer Gone* (2000) was nominated for the Giller Prize and won the Chapters/Books in Canada first-novel prize. His most recent novel, *The Figures of Beauty* (2014), is published by HarperCollins. Macfarlane has won numerous National Magazine Awards and a National Newspaper Award. He is currently engaged in *The Toronto Project*, the creation of a digital museum of Toronto.

AMY LUO is a Toronto-based arts writer. She studies at the University of Toronto, specializing in art history and women and gender studies. She has worked for the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the University of Toronto Art Centre. She is the winner of the 2014 Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize and is currently the online editorial intern at *Canadian Art*.

DANIELLA E. SANADER is an arts writer and researcher living in Toronto. She is originally from Hamilton and completed her MA at McGill University in 2013. She currently works for the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and University of Toronto Art Centre. Her writing has been published in *C Magazine*, *BlackFlash*, the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and *Canadian Art* online, among others. In 2014 she was runner-up for the Canadian Art Foundation Writing Prize.