

INTERVIEW

WITH

RACHEL MACLEAN

RACHEL MACLEAN'S VIDEOS mimic the very thing they critique: tear-jerking talent shows, sentimental cartoon animations, salacious tabloid screamers. They rebuke the free market fairytale and its promise of infinite resources and infinite indulgence, and remind us that the appetites of capitalism have been internalised. To look is to binge. To buy is libidinous. As Deleuze and Guattari wrote in *ANTI-OEDIPUS* (1972), the unconscious is a factory and we are all desiring-machines.

Maclean, who will represent Scotland at the 2017 Venice Biennale, came to prominence with *LOLCATS*, first shown at Generator Projects, Dundee in 2012. The video collage is inspired by the lolcat internet meme and muses on forms of cat worship from Ancient Egypt's sphinxes to Disney's *ARISTOCATS*. Maclean stitches together found audio – Katy Perry soundbites or clips from *THE WIZARD OF OZ* – and concocts bizarre, fantastical characters to mime along, from blue-skinned bunnies to misshapen Disney princesses. Filming the pantomime characters against a green screen, she adds in backdrops and after-effects in post-production, adding layer after layer in what becomes a form of 2D digital baroque. *LOLCATS* established a very particular, phantasmagoric language, a palette of candy pinks and slush-puppy blues that invokes the strange utopia of Disney as it meets a psychedelic, adult-themed toontown. The many protagonists zigzagging through *LOLCATS* are, as through all her videos, played by Maclean herself. She appears in many guises, as a young Dorothy-esque girl in long white socks, or a clique of shaven-headed cat haters – a procession of playthings that chase each other through a desktop screensaver desert. Their destination: a fluffy, kitty heaven in the DreamWorks clouds above.

Maclean's feature-length video *FEED ME* (2015) was shown as part of the touring British Art Show 8. Instead of using found audio, Maclean wrote the script herself, a dystopian fairytale that centres around a malicious toy corporation called Smile Inc. and its cult of extreme, unremitting positivity. Maclean plays, respectively, a young social media addict, a hostile Scottish granny, a business executive-cum-Tabloid monster, and a lecherous beast that wants to play in the nursery. Maclean shape-shifts, appearing as every character at once in bizarre, half-familiar guises, dressing in party costumes, psychedelic wigs and thick coatings of face paint. All of this is then overlaid with further special effects in the studio, where the Polly Pocket castles and talent show arenas are digitally inserted. A pervading sense of unease runs through *FEED ME*, but we are not entirely sure *who* is in danger; the Little Girl might be mauled by The Beast at any moment, and the Granny may even be a wolf in disguise, but the youths in hoodies are out for revenge too, and part of the hypnotic thrall of Maclean's work is the way stereotypes are set up only to be inverted.

I meet Maclean at Frieze London, where a version of her latest film *IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS* (2016) is showing. We struggle to find each other amid the crowd of VVVIPs, a curiously appropriate sea of bronzed men in chinos and women in fluorescent suits. Escaping the marquee, we find a picnic bench in a quiet alcove of Regent's Park. The October sun is fat and golden, like the Happy Inc. logo; intrepid squirrels scuttle under the hedges, circling closer as we speak.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — On some level, *FEED ME* (2015) is about binge watching. I found that I couldn't look away; I wanted more and more. Do you think your work inhabits the thing it critiques?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I tried to generate that feeling, of tempting my viewer to keep on watching it, wanting to consume more. *FEED ME* is made in the same language as reality TV, *BRITAIN'S GOT TALENT* and *THE X FACTOR*. I spent a lot of time on YouTube and I wanted my references to be widely recognisable, part of common culture that anybody living in Britain could pick up. TV formats are like templates and they've become global: Chinese TV, for example, uses a *BRITAIN'S GOT TALENT* formula. These templates mean that you can bring people into your world and they understand where they are. Then you can begin to subvert it.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — That TV format is primed to extract emotion from its viewers. Are you trying to exploit the viewer?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I was interested in having an element of that emotional manipulation in *FEED ME*, but what's equally important is to destabilise the format. A story is suddenly subverted, and it leads into another narrative, or switches to the very opposite tone. So you might be binge watching, but the form pushes back at you. I like art that makes you feel uncomfortable and unsettled, the films of Paul McCarthy for example, or Carolee Schneemann, or Alejandro Jodorowsky. McCarthy in particular has such a dark sense of humour, but he's also in some sense satirising performance art by using ketchup instead of blood and raking masculinity over the coals.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The characters in

FEED ME are part fairytale roster, part tabloid caricatures. There's the granny, the beast and the business exec, and also a number of Tween protagonists – the Little Girls – who are always a step away from being exploited by the adults around them.

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — There are threats in all directions. On the one hand the idea of adult care is subverted, but children threaten adults too. The scales constantly tip. The title is about consumption – the desire to eat, but also the feeling of never being full, of constantly having to feed the beast. I was interested in the different ways you could read 'feed me' – in terms of consumer capitalism, but also the question of who feeds who in society. Do we feed each other? Or feed off each other?

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Before *FEED ME* you worked only with found audio. What was it like writing a script?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — The challenge was to script it but at the same time to keep the spliced effect that comes from digital and audio collage. I wanted to keep the sense of channel changing, or changing between genres. I was very conscious that a script might smooth it out, which is something I wanted to avoid. I worked with a number of comedians and vocal actors to record the script; I like actors who have the ability to change their voice and morph into different identities.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — And then you play all the roles yourself. Every character is you. Do you take pleasure in performing? Or is it a conceptual necessity?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I have become very interested in grotesque characters, dressing up and being really grubby and repulsive. My costumes were very DIY for a long time and I was doing all the makeup myself. It was basic

stuff – rubber gloves, face paint, occasionally buying a prosthetic nose. But I've begun working with makeup artists and I love the world of prosthetic makeup and the possibilities of it. I love the potential of being able to look completely unlike myself.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — There are so many versions of you in *LOLCATS* and many of them look like clones with mirroring costumes, perhaps a different colour wig.

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I'm glad that the 'lolcats' meme still exists because that film took me years to make, and I was worried that it would disappear. It was the first video I made in that style, working with green screen to create a grotesque fairytale world. I wanted it to seem partly like the Euro Disney theme park, and partly like an ancient fable of fallen civilisation.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you have your own green screen studio?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — The green screen phase is relatively short, perhaps three to five intense days, so I don't need one. Most of my time is spent in post-production. I like working with green screen because you can make huge changes in the post-production phases. It's the later phases that count.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You have a teaser of your new film showing at Frieze, before its screening at HOME Manchester and Tate, called *IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS* (2016). This time round, the evil corporation is called 'BU', with the slogan 'Just be urself!' Are you out to critique attempts at corporate authenticity?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — The film reflects on selfhood and 'being yourself' in the realm of the internet and social media. So many of us

have, intentionally or not, created a version of ourselves online: an idealised alter ego, edited and cleansed of the banal. Social media is saturated with self-help articles and sunny notions of self-acceptance, mindfulness and meditation, which are all dangerously apolitical and obsessively individualistic. This kind of pseudo-therapy trains you to understand that all the problems you experience stem from your own perception rather than any real social experience. There is something totally absurd about it, and I think we could do with finding a way to channel anger and unhappiness, rather than sedating it. As I was writing the script for *IT'S WHAT'S INSIDE THAT COUNTS*, I was also thinking about female-oriented beauty adverts and their cynical borrowing of the language of feminism. The most recent Gillette Venus advert, for example, seems to remind women to be themselves and to avoid getting boxed by expectations of what women can and can't achieve... but P.S., don't forget to shave your legs whilst you're at it. I wanted the BU corporation and its female figurehead, Data, to represent something of this commodified contemporary feminism. Part Kim Kardashian and part cyborg, she morphs between different versions of herself: at some moments she's a beloved superstar, at other moments she is a fallen version of herself on a life-support machine.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Data is a kind of Instagram celebrity, who is constantly uploading images of herself online. And she has no nose – it's been edited out of her image, but also quite literally removed from her face. Why?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — As with *FEED ME*, I've been returning to two icons – vector graphics that are somewhere between emoticons and the Hello Kitty logo. Circular, yellow, noseless

faces, one happy and the other sad. Noses are obsolete within emoticon design because they communicate no emotion. And in a near future world of screens, where emotions are more important than smells or bodily relationships to the world, a noseless face is an apt sigil. In this film, I wanted to turn the graphics into physical characters, and the results were surprising; instead of being slick and clean, the emoticon characters are brought to life in a fleshy and revolting form. Not all the characters in the film are noseless, and there's an implication of class – a form of genetic modification or plastic surgery, say, which allows you to remove your nose or become a cyborg, if you can afford it.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1985) put forward the cyborg as a hybrid self that feminists might code to get out of the maze of patriarchy. Are you cynical of her proposition?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I'm definitely interested in cyberfeminism, but compared to what we know about the internet now, it seems a little naïve – it's a utopian version of what could have been. My work is a form of satire, taking familiar things and pushing them into caricature, into the grotesque. I want to move between genres, and while I'm primarily in the realm of comedy and political satire, I also want moments of sincerity to feed in too. I want it to be complicated, so it's neither straight-ironic nor straight-satirical. The songs in *FEED ME*, for instance, have a degree of sincerity, with emotions that might register directly, so the viewer can buy into them on some level. After all, capitalism is seductive. The problem with satire is that it can be distancing and I think it's more honest to show that you're mixed up in it – that you're not looking in from above, but that you're

complicit. I want the viewer to be sucked in, but to provide something that kicks back too.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Did you watch a lot of children's television?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I watched a lot of TV, things like *IN THE NIGHT GARDEN* and *TELETUBBIES*, both of which have that weird format because its producers have realised that kids like gobbledygook. You have characters like Tombliboo Ooo and Tombliboo Eee, with a paternal male voice narrating it. Those TV shows are used for childminding; they're hypnotic. *IN THE NIGHT GARDEN* is a basic, passive entertainment, used to keep a child's brain ticking over.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — This idea of hypnosis reminds me of a movie called *JOSIE AND THE PUSSYCATS* (2001), about a girl band exploited by a malicious record company. The producers put subliminal messages below their songs to brainwash the fans. It's a metaphor, perhaps, for the hypnosis of advertising and the seductions of capitalism.

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I played a lot of video games as a teenager, which function in a similar way. As a teenage girl, you're at your most vulnerable and there are so many pressures around what is put upon you as a young woman – what to play, what to buy, what to be.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you remember feeling like a consumer archetype? A figure of total integration?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I remember the anxiety of being that age, when you buy without critical distance. As an adult, you have some critical distance: you still buy, but at least you understand, to some extent, how you're being manipulated. I remember as a teenager watching adverts on TV, and the very direct way in

which they spoke to me. The desire.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In *GERMS*, you present a series of advertising tropes which are all familiar but refracted into the strange world of *FEED ME* and *LOLCATS*. They are distortions of Clearasil skin adverts, perfume adverts, Mr Muscle cleaning sprays and yoghurt sales pitches, all as products of your imaginary brand 'Mask'.

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I'm interested in the way adverts deal with things that you can't see, but might be happening beneath the surface. They sell cleaning products for germs that live invisibly on your surfaces. Maybe you've cleaned it already with another cleaning spray, but it's still there... It's the same with shampoo and moisturiser, which are sold on the basis of something that will happen beneath the surface of your skin, that you can't see, but you have to believe in. They demand equal measures of belief and paranoia.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Which is a terrifying combination! In *GERMS*, there's a perfume advert with a seductive Paris Hilton-esque voice that says, 'Why tell him it's perfume when he thinks it's you?'

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — It's about selling a fantasy lifestyle, a kind of fairytale. They can't sell perfume on anything other than fantasy, because it's nothing more than a bottle of smelly water. But there are also currents of desire, attraction and lust. It's about who you want to be.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — *FEED ME*, *GERMS*, *OVER THE RAINBOW* (2013) all seem to comment on and satirise contemporary life from within a fantasy space.

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — It's somewhere between the fantasy and reality. There are

moments where the language used, or the TV formats echoed, locate the films in the world we know, or at least within the genre of 'reality'. But at the same time, I want to reference the fairytale world. I'm interested in the relationship of fairytales to culture, how they have morphed and been reinterpreted and rewritten in ways that reflect things we are conscious of not being conscious of.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Running through *FEED ME* is the sexualisation of childhood. There are currents of perversion, paedophilia and the subversion of adult 'care' – like the scene in which the Business Executive acts out something like a masturbatory fantasy by sticking his fingers in a pot of Vaseline as he watches the Little Girl on a secret camera. Were you thinking about the world of pornography, which is also a realm of airbrushed, smooth, candified bodies?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — Certain scandals around paedophilia broke the news around the time I was making *FEED ME*, particularly the Jimmy Savile scandal, so that all fed in. But I wanted threats to be running through the film on different levels, and I was equally interested in the way that childhood is perceived as a threat by adults. I grew up in the 1990s and the Blair era, when working class youth was seen as a threat. Society has a strange idea of innocence, as something that's held out for particular people and not for others. On another level, adults are infantilised by the nanny state. I wanted there to be elements of health and safety culture in there too, of adults living in a soft, padded world, where you can sue somebody if you get hurt. I'm thinking about the difference between pretending and reality, and how pretending can lead to the 'real thing'. The idea that kids commit crimes because they've been playing violent video

games or watching violent films. How do we bridge the gap between pretending and doing? At what point do we decide that those things are different? I read that in 2013, the police made a CGI model of a young girl, called 'Sweetie', and used her to find paedophiles online. The paedophiles would start grooming the girl, asking to meet her, but it was a setup. The line between who is pretending and who is really 'doing' is complicated. Ultimately, it's about intent.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — One of the theoretical backdrops to *FEED ME* is happiness as demanded in the work place. Sara Ahmed's book *THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS* (2010) considers the imperative to be happy – to chase your dream, love your job, follow your desires – which is part of the myth of capitalism. After all, happy workers are more productive...

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — *FEED ME* runs on happiness affirmations and is ruled by Smile Inc., but happiness turns towards violence. I'm interested in the way these things have been co-opted. Mindfulness, like happiness, has been turned into a product by the tech industry. You can download a mindfulness app to make you more productive at work – which completely undermines the original premise of mindfulness, at least as I understand it. I was also thinking of the Google offices, which have ball pits and play zones. They offer workers free lunches, which is a gift with strings attached because it's about harvesting as much work as possible. The line between what is fun and what is work has been blurred.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Have you ever worked for a corporation?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — I've worked for big supermarkets in customer service, and seen the way your behaviour, as an employee, is

micromanaged. At Marks & Spencer, for example, you're trained to say certain things at the till. You have to say 'thank you for waiting' and not 'sorry for the wait', because 'thank you' is positive. Or if you're on the shop floor, you're encouraged to interact with shoppers and if you see them pick out a skirt, you might add, 'have you thought of the top to go with it?' It's scripted and it's your job to say that, at least when they're watching you.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You play all the characters in your films; what does it mean to be all of them? Does it limit what you can say, and whom you can speak on behalf of?

^A RACHEL MACLEAN — My characters are one step removed from me, and one step removed from reality: they never have real skin colours, or real facial features, and they draw on the fantasy of cartoons. I'm interested by fantasy spaces within fairytales, and the way that Hollywood and Disney use other worlds. *POCAHONTAS* (1995) was the first Disney film set in the United States; all of the others are set in realms which are both imaginary and specific in time and space. So there is a sense in which Disney talks about something very specific to an American worldview, but transported into another global context – an Americanised Aladdin, set in Jordan – and then exports it to the world. Then there are science-fiction epics like *AVATAR* (2009), an exploration of white man's guilt and white man's conscience, set in a clunky fairytale context. There are some very traditional elements to that film.

^Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In *FEED ME*, Smile Inc. gives away stress balls that say 'I'm too happy' when they're squeezed. It's a free gift, but with hidden ramifications – which is a trope of consumer capitalism, and of the

fairytale too. Are you looking for a modern language, a consumer language, for those tropes?

[^] RACHEL MACLEAN — I like sinister objects. You don't know what the consequences of accepting them are, but they are ominous. What are you giving? Data? Emotions? The same is true of Facebook: it's a free service, but Facebook isn't the product, you are the product. The world of Silicon Valley can be menacing. There's a utopian narrative that gets rolled out, this idea of changing the world for the public good. A narrative of protection and care. But Silicon Valley promotes free market capitalism in a different guise. Tech might be reinventing the realm of work – work anytime you want! – but that freedom is a zero-hour contract.

IZABELLA SCOTT, OCTOBER 2016