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Local Spotlight

New Langton Arts hosts a retrospective of the collaborative works of Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse

by Anjali Sundaram



The Trial of Harmony and Invention: Spring (2008)

DO NOT REMOVE. PROPERTY OF ATLAS CAFÉ. A *Harper's Bazaar* magazine bearing this inscription lies on a table in the Mission-district studio of Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse. It is a late-July afternoon, and Muse rifles through the pilfered text, reading, "At the start of every season, the first thing I did was analyze my wardrobe...." The fashion editorial is easily parodied when taken out of context, but Muse and Finley see in it the promise of reinvention. According to Finley, their current work-in-progress, *The Trial of Harmony and Invention: Spring*, "will have something to do with narcissism and vanity...." Muse explains, "There exists within the word 'vanity,' the idea of the empty and the full: the emptiness of the reflection, the fullness of one's own self-apprehension." The media installation premieres this month as part of "Jovial Tales for Tragic Sensibilities," New Langton Art's retrospective of the duo's work.

The installation will use two walls, a one-way mirror, two video projectors, and a monitor. Larger-than-life images are to be layered within this three-dimensional space. Here, the spectator will find herself implicated in an elaborate interplay of shadow, projection, and reflection. As we talk, Finley and Muse are

seated rather formally, on either side of a small-scale mock-up of the piece. As they describe its dynamic, logarithmic effects, it strikes me that *Spring* might also be read as a metaphor for their enduring and prolific collaboration.

"There is something wonderful about what we make together that could not exist for either of us as individuals," says Finley. "We inspire each other with our bad ideas—they may have some gem inside them which, in turn, provokes another idea." They have worked together on and off since 1989, but have been fully collaborating over the past six years on installations and videos for SF MOMA, the Lincoln Center in New York, and Galleria Otso in Finland. Finley is chair of California College of the Arts' film/video/performance department, a Fulbright scholar, and a Guggenheim fellow. Muse is currently a Ph.D. candidate at UC Berkeley in the department of rhetoric. Recent recipients of a joint Rockefeller media arts fellowship, both hold MFAs in photography, but have gravitated toward experimental documentary, video installation, and site-specific work. Their grounding in still photography and the pleasures of seeing is evident in their work. Noting that this

approach has fallen out of favor among many artists and critics today, Muse declares unabashedly, "We let our tastes dictate what survives in the work. If we don't have a passionate relationship to what we're seeing; then no matter how much it might conceptually orient the thematic, it won't make it into the piece."

The Trial of Harmony and Invention: Winter (2002) is the first installation in the series inspired by Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, of which *Spring* is the second installment. The familiar classical work is made strange as 24 different performances of the concerto, varied in length, are layered in an arrangement in which each piece ends on the same note. This dizzying, sonic sensation is amplified by images refracted by a disco ball and scattered in a darkened room. Toy planes slowly tumble through water and air. A phosphorescent butterfly floats across a battery of airplane altimeters as they tick off a rapid fall towards the earth. On the floor, projected waves crash against the shore. The piece resonates with questions concerning nature and technology, perception and time, life and death. "Disorientation is a major the-

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matic and strategy," says Muse. "We are interested in how, in this current day and age, one orients oneself to one's space, one's time—the physical space that one inhabits metaphorically."

Conversion, both religious and therapeutic, is another theme that runs through much of their work. *The Adventures of Blacky* (1998), on view at New Langton, is based on a psychological test from the 1950s. A spot-lit chair sinks into the center of a dark room. Test cards depicting a family of cocker spaniels are projected on one wall as the disembodied voice of the examiner probes the mind of a young girl. Multiple-choice answers are offered to questions like: Which member of the family most likely arranged for Tippy's tail to be cut off? Again, parody is not the operative strategy here, rather the test is used as a way of provoking reflection on the subtexts of violence, authority, and psychoanalysis that seek to convert or mark the subject at an early age.

Jovial Tales for Tragic Sensibilities

New Langton Arts has organized a city-wide retrospective (September 17–October 18) of the collaborative work of Jeanne C. Finley and John Muse, featuring the world premiere of *The Trial of Harmony and Invention: Spring* in the New Langton gallery. On October 16, the San Francisco Exploratorium remounts *A Wing and a Prayer* (2002), in which single-channel videos are projected onto 15-foot angel sculptures salvaged from the original Palace of Fine Arts. Musician Pamela Z also performs *Voci* and *Gaijin*, two pieces created with Finley and Muse. On October 7, Film Arts Foundation hosts Finley and Muse in a discussion with Other Cinema's Craig Baldwin and critic Margaret Morse (see "Education" on page 25). newlangtonarts.org

The retrospective also includes Finley's solo work from the 1980s—slide presentations with elaborate audio tracks—in a program curated by S.F. Cinematheque's David Sherman. "I began doing slide shows to create a sensory experience where I could make text an audio experience as opposed to a reading experience," explains Finley. Highlights of the slide shows, *Against a Single Match*, *Darkness Flinches* (1988) and *Deaf Dogs Can Hear* (1983) explore the border between fiction and nonfiction storytelling, another methodology characterizing Finley's collaboration with Muse. In the catalog accompanying the show, photographer Mark Alice Durant offers insight into the nature of their work: "The collaborative works of Finley and Muse are powered by the friction created between despair and its antidote, engaged storytelling. Finley and Muse marry the fictional with the documentary, the still with the moving image, the vernacular with cultivated elegance, the mythic with the mundane, and monumental social forces with the most humble of narratives."

A rare opportunity to consider the evolution of an artistic practice over time, "Jovial Tales" is a collection of work that is complex, moving, and visually seductive. "Most of all," as New Langton curator Susan Miller says, "they know how to tell a great story."

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