



Nottingham  
Contemporary

Mika Rottenberg  
James Gillray

5 May – 1 July 2012  
Exhibition Notes

## For more information

If you have any questions or want to find out more about the exhibition, please ask our friendly Gallery Assistants. They're here to help!

We also have free Spot Tours of the exhibitions every day, Tue – Fri. Please ask for times at Reception.



Logo by Klaus Weber

## Mika Rottenberg

Mika Rottenberg's bizarre and humorous films have been described as a cross between fairy tales and commercials. You see them in complex installations that feel like film sets. The artist describes these as "viewing machines". The world Rottenberg presents is familiar from popular culture and current affairs, but has the absurd logic of a dream.

Rottenberg's works feature women with extraordinary bodies – who make their living directly through their bodies, often on websites. They include the super tall Bunny Glamazon, flexible Felicia Ballos, bodybuilder Heather Foster, long-haired Leona, and the curvy Queen Raqui.

A serious feminist interest in women's work informs her art – particularly low paid labour. She deliberately confuses Marx's idea of the commodity fetish, where products are designed to hide the labour that has gone into them, and Freud's idea of the sexual fetish.

"What fascinates me is Marx's theory of labour and value, but in a poetic sense, not a political sense", Rottenberg says. "People use their vitality in order to make products. Therefore every product contains part of the lives of the people that were involved in making it. I like the idea of measuring the value of something not by its 'use value' but by the processes that were invested in its making – the amount of 'life' that was put into it."

## Time and a Half

2003 – Single channel video, 3.40 mins.

A long-haired woman from Guam, a Pacific island, rhythmically taps her long finger nails on the counter of the Chinese takeaway where she works. The film's title refers to overtime, and she is plainly a manual labourer – a hired “hand” in fact. But her hands aren't making anything at all. The woman is employed simply waiting. In contrast to her trapped state in the restaurant, the camera lingers on a lush landscape, while a cooling breeze appears to stir her hair. But all is artifice. The landscape is simply a decorative picture, while a cheap fan has produced the tropical breeze – an exotic world reduced to the reality of low-paid labour and tourist spectacle.



Mika Rottenberg, *Cheese*, 2008.  
Installation view, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of Art, 2008.  
Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary.

Entrance

## Cheese

2008 – Multi-channel video installation, 20 mins.

*Cheese* is loosely based on the Grimm's fairy story Rapunzel. It also refers to the seven singing Sutherland Sisters who toured the US in the 19th century, selling their father's hair growth product. The women milk goats, make cheese from the milk – and tend their extraordinarily long hair. The Sutherland Sisters could have been said to have “milked” their long locks as they made millions selling their baldness cure.



Mika Rottenberg, Still from *Cheese*, 2007. C-print.  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery

## Fried Sweat

2008 – Single channel video installation, 2 mins.

Gallery 1

## Squeeze

2010 – Single channel video installation and digital c-print, 20 mins.

In *Squeeze*, Rottenberg has expanded her world and gone global. Chinese women reach through portals to massage Mexican women working in a Californian lettuce field. A woman's abundant flesh turns pink when she is squeezed by compressing walls. She 'manufactures' blusher from her pink cheeks. The blusher, lettuce and rubber create a mass-produced 'art object', proudly displayed by the real-life art dealer Mary Boone.

The final art object is never exhibited – it is designed to be safely stored off-shore, where it will presumably rot and perish. The work is a meditation on value, and the surreal qualities of the art world, where an essentially useless and ugly object can gain value in the right circulation systems.

"The driving force of capitalism is fiction." Rottenberg says. "It thrives on a form of story-telling that inflates the importance and value of objects and it works like a kind of magic: 'If you buy this, you can become this.' In shooting the 'documentary' material I wanted to get out of my own world, creating a direct portal to the real world. But it is not an attempt to make my work more realistic. It is maybe an attempt to show that reality is as bizarre as my own fiction."



Mika Rottenberg, Mary Boone with Cube, 2010.  
Digital C-print (1 component of Squeeze installation).  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery

## SEVEN (Chris)

2012 – Mixed media with three channel video, 36.08 mins.  
Collaboration with Jon Kessler.

Seven depicts an intricate laboratory that channels body fluids and colours into a spectacle on the African savannah. At one end of the assembly-line a New York-based laboratory harvests sweat in a 'Chakra Juicer'. Television monitors show the African side of the operation, conducted by the residents of a tiny, isolated village.

## Sneeze

2012 – Single channel video



*Video stills from:* Mika Rottenberg and Jon Kessler, SEVEN, 2012.  
Mixed media with three channel video.  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery; Andrea Rosen Gallery;  
Salon 94 and Galerie Laurent Godin

### **Mary's Cherries**

2004 – Single channel video installation, 5.50 mins.

Women in the bright uniforms of the corporate service industries transform red acrylic fingernails into maraschino cherries in a process that invokes sexual ritual, beauty treatments, and assembly-line labour. A reciprocal energy cycle works throughout the film, where the product is exchanged from body part, to packaged food stuff and is then returned back to the body again.

### **Tropical Breeze**

2004 – Single channel video installation, 3.45 mins.

A female body-builder drives a delivery truck while consuming products that increase her perspiration and infuse it with lemon. She wipes her perspiration with tissues and sends them back to be packaged as 'lemon-scented moist tissue' by an acrobatic woman who picks up the tissues with her toes. Rottenberg demonstrates her interest in how pronounced physical characteristics can be a means for self-determination and control. Physically echoing the video, Tropical Breeze is screened inside a container mimicking a big rig's trailer.



Mika Rottenberg, Barbara from Mary's Cherries, 2004. C-print.  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery

## Dough

2005-2006 – Single channel video installation, 7 mins.

Rottenberg's videos update the absurd take on relationships between bodies and machines seen in the cartoons of Heath Robinson and the films of Charlie Chaplin. Dough features a bizarre assembly line set in a cross between a down-market beauty salon, the set of a home decorating programme, and a sweatshop. A woman smells flowers to provoke hay fever tears, which trickle down her enormous body into a hole in the floor where they eventually cause the dough to rise. The dough is then stretched and manipulated through holes into multiple chambers by the six foot nine Tall Kat, whose long limbs stretch from room to room.

*Mika Rottenberg was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and grew up in Israel. She now lives in New York and Barcelona. This is her first solo show in the UK, bringing together her major works from 2003 to 2012. It was initiated by De Appel, Amsterdam's leading arts centre and travelled to M-Museum Leuven in Belgium before coming to Nottingham.*

*We would like to thank the following lenders to Mika Rottenberg's exhibition for their generosity: Le Case D'Arte, Milan; Julia Stoschek Foundation e.V, Düsseldorf; Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris*



Mika Rottenberg, Dough (video still), 2006.  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery

## James Gillray

James Gillray (1756 – 1815) was and still is England's greatest caricaturist. Such was his fame that his work was avidly collected by the very politicians that he mercilessly lampooned. Even the Prince of Wales – portrayed as a bloated victim of his own enormous appetites – bought them.

It is hard for us to imagine today the stir created by new Gillray works displayed in the window of Mrs Hannah Humphrey's print shop in the heart of London's fashionable West End. Gillray himself lived "above the shop". He was thus in a prime position to observe the preening, lecherous and outrageously dressed collision of high society and low-life around St James's and Bond Street – his portrayal of the Earl of Sandwich sexually propositioning an attractive barrow girl was probably drawn from life.

Like modern day cartoonists, Gillray had to respond very quickly to the rising tide of political scandals. He kept a stock of small cards in the palm of his hand to secretly sketch a likeness with a pencil. He also made frequent trips to Parliament to capture any new character on the political stage – rising stars of both parties knew they had arrived when Gillray viciously paraded their foibles.



James Gillray, He Steers his Flight, 1810  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Gillray belongs to the golden age of British caricature, which also included Isaac Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson, but is peerless. They were all known for bawdy and savage mockery of their targets. Gillray, though, raised popular caricature to the level of art. As in the literary satires of Alexander Pope and John Dryden, he imaginatively and ironically re-staged the base and frivolous deeds of the past week as great set-pieces from Shakespeare, Milton, the Old Testament and the Classics. His visual wit has the surreal modernity of the best comedy of our own time – Fox's 'broad-bottomed' opposition appear as a swarm of bees in one etching, while a rotund Bishop rises above the populace as a hot air balloon in another. Gillray combined brilliant draftsmanship with a devastating way with words. A languid and overstuffed Prince of Wales is hyperbolically identified as A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion.



James Gillray, (1757 – 1815) A Voluptuary Under The Horrors of Digestion, 1792.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

## Politics

For a caricaturist this was a rich period to work in. The two most prominent politicians, arch-rivals William Pitt the Younger (1759 – 1806) and Charles James Fox (1749 – 1806) gave Gillray two physically comic contrasts.

The Whig, or radical, leader Fox was short, fat and hairy, known as a drinker and gambler. Tory Pitt was tall and thin, a conviction politician.

John Bull, the archetypal and long suffering Englishman, is a bumbling country bumpkin, taxed to the hilt. Taxation rose dramatically in this period, mainly to fill the war chest, but also to pay off the debts of the profligate Prince of Wales.

A Great Stream from a Petty Fountain depicts all the new taxes coming in at the 1806 budget – a literal fountain of tax including ‘New Coffee Tax’, ‘New Tea Tax’, ‘New Hop-Tax’, ‘New Malt-Tax’, ‘New Assessed Taxes’, ‘New Tax on Sugar’, ‘New Spirit Tax’, ‘New Tobacco Tax’, ‘New Candle Tax’. The torrent of tax is surrounded by greedy politicians and business-men, like cormorants feeding off fish, while poor John Bull struggles to keep his head above water.

Political parties were not slow to see the propaganda value of Gillray’s prints. Controversially between 1797 and 1801, he received a pension from the Tory party, and produced a number of anti-Whig works. There was a rumour that he was pressured into this by being threatened with legal action over a ‘blasphemous’ work.

## Gallery 4



James Gillray, The Plumb Pudding in Danger, 1805  
© V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London

## Gallery 4

## France

The momentous events of the French Revolution and the long war with the French that followed it dominated much of Gillray's career. Many Britons were at first sympathetic to the Revolutionaries, but during the Reign of Terror in the early 1790s, Gillray's peasant "sans culottes" – shown literally without trousers – become sharp-toothed cannibals, capable of any atrocity. The Whigs (and Fox in particular) were portrayed as keen supporters of the Republican cause. Napoleon was depicted as a petite and petulant dictator, becoming ever smaller as his empire grew.



James Gillray, Maniac ravings or Little Boney in a strong fit, 1803  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

## Gallery 4

## Royalty / Society / Fashion

The richly eccentric royal family, and their circle of dukes, wives and mistresses, were targets which would have gladdened the heart of any caricaturist. The household of King George III and his wife Queen Charlotte was famously dull and deeply mean. In contrast, their eldest son, the Prince of Wales, indulged in every pleasure and acquired huge debts. The King was a Tory supporter and loathed his son, while the Whigs supported the whims of the Prince in an effort to gain future influence. King George himself suffered from bouts of "madness" and was subject to outlandish treatments.

The Georgian public had a keen appetite for gossip, plentifully supplied by flagrant affairs, unsuitable aristocratic marriages and shamelessly conspicuous spending. As in today's gossip mags, Gillray's prints have a strong sense of celebrities "found out" – to the satisfaction of the salacious viewer.

The West End around his home and print shop would have been a fashion parade of high society, and those desperate to join it. Women wore low cut flimsy muslin, accessorised with extravagant hats and towering feathers perched on powdered wigs. Fashionable young men strode out in tight breeches, cutaway coats and extravagantly piled cravats.

Gillray ultimately suffered the same fate as the King he satirised. He lost his sanity in 1810 and was cared for by the devoted Mrs Humphrey until he died in 1815.

## Gallery 4



James Gillray, Parasols, for 1795  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

## Events

4 July 1776: America declares independence

1783: William Pitt the Younger becomes Britain's youngest Prime Minister, ushering in 23 years of unbroken Tory rule

1789: The French Revolution

1792 – 1802: French Revolutionary Wars

1793: execution of French King Louis XVI

1799: first introduction of income tax in England

1803 – 1815: Napoleonic Wars

1804: Bonaparte declared Emperor

1805: Battle of Trafalgar (Death of Nelson)

1806: Pitt and Fox die

1807: Slave trade in the British Empire – but not slavery itself – is abolished

1811: Prince of Wales declared Regent

1815: Battle of Waterloo 1815. Gillray dies 17 days earlier

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*Front image:* Mika Rottenberg, Felicia from Tropical Breeze, 2004 (detail). C-print.  
Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery and Andrea Rosen Gallery.

Logo by Chris Evans



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