



Rebecca Ackroyd
PERES PROJECTS

Rebecca Ackroyd’s show “100mph” seemed still in a process of becoming. The gallery was filled with modular walls and temporary scaffolds wrapped in dust sheets. From the outside, the space looked closed for refurbishment; inside, the plastic rustled as you walked past, swelling with air and then receding. The twenty-seven drawings and sculptures that comprised this show were hung over the plastic and depicted metal air vents, grilles, and drains. There were also fishnet stockings as well as tights so ludicrously full of runs that they, too, were apertures as much as membranes. For Ackroyd, architecture is synonymous with the body and with holes filled with substances that, depending on the pressure applied, may or may not burst forth. The space behind the riblike vent in *Fillet* (all works 2020), for example, ominously glowed red, while the skin seen through the pantyhose of *Against the fence* was bruised pink and scuffed, an impression heightened by the paper’s ripped edges and the artist’s use of precarious, dusty pastel.

A sense of the performance of gender, the shape-shifter, took over as one walked between objects. Femininity here was jam-packed, bulging, bawdy—almost monstrous. Take, for instance, the green flesh that swells through nylon in the drawing *1,000,000 eggs*. Ackroyd questions the stakes of female sexuality amid contemporary narratives of progress in a post-#MeToo world. She questions subjectivity, wondering if narratives of “beauty begets value” and “short skirt begets rape” have shifted. The drawing *Drip feed* even depicts a burning red ear receiving the words she was asking for it from ruby-red lips, underlining the violent language that sculpts misogyny.

Further motifs included spiderwebs and long red hair like Ackroyd’s. (The artist herself appears in the drawing *In all my fear or glory*, her swirling mass of locks crowned by a huge spider that swaddles her in silk.) Ackroyd’s arachnids are masters of their own realm, weaving perfectly perforated homes—perhaps embodying an emancipatory alternative femininity à la Louise Bourgeois? A web doubles as broken glass in the aptly titled *Scream Therapy*, a work that pays homage to Sarah Goodridge’s *Beauty Revealed*, 1828, a miniature of the nineteenth-century American painter’s pert breasts, which she bestowed upon a lover. Ackroyd’s *Side Saddle* portrays a triangular pubic mane. At its lowest point, a rivulet of red runs between a pair of legs, which look like muddy riverbanks: a leaky body longing to be landscape or dreamscape.

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Ackroyd repeatedly winks at the late-nineteenth-century concept of the femme fatale, conjuring psychoanalysis: Jean-Martin Charcot's hysterical woman meets Sigmund Freud's couch. The psychoanalyst once mused that despite his "thirty years of research into the feminine soul," he had not found an answer to the question, "What does a woman want?" Well, ain't that the question. Fittingly, the suite of pen-and-color-pencil drawings that lent the show its title, 100mph, delves into the artist's own fragmented dreams, peppered with orgies, black-rubber sex toys, and ejaculate explosions. In one, artists are turned to pig slop in a meat grinder. This comic-book-style arrangement conveys the complexity of the subconscious, moving between desire, empowerment, and anxiety. It pointedly leaves Freud's enquiry unanswered—or, rather, dismisses it as irrelevant, a succinct answer to such a question being impossible with regard to any person.

Ackroyd's past works often rendered figures devoid of gender altogether. With this show she deconstructed femininity into fragments, as exemplified by the wall-mounted translucent epoxy-resin sculpture Trawler. A woman's bewigged head and torso, legs nowhere in sight, are facedown on a couch. (Is she being fucked by Freud?) In real life we cannot fragment ourselves to escape the confines of our bodies, but the way bodies are judged and treated can be changed. Ackroyd suggests, as does Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), that female sexuality can be neither understood nor recognized when interpreted through a phallogocentric lens. "100mph" asked us to speed ahead, stay fluid, flow through, wonder what else bodies could look like, and accept the joy inherent in such indefinable shapes.

— Louisa Elderton