

Spite Your Face: Rachel Maclean at Talbot Rice Gallery



‘We are living’ says Rachel Maclean ‘in interesting times.’

The acclaimed video artist (and Edinburgh College of Art graduate) is speaking at the University of Edinburgh’s Playfair Library. Across the courtyard of Old College, Maclean’s latest work ***Spite Your Face*** is showing at Talbot Rice Gallery. The library is packed; Maclean is fast becoming one of Scotland’s most popular and exciting young artists, her CV brimming with exhibitions and screenings. Introducing the event, Talbot Rice’s Stuart Fallon describes her work as ‘simultaneously alluring and unsettling.’ Maclean addresses hot topics like Trump and Brexit, social media and social anxiety. Her strongly political message, is, as Fallon says, ‘unflinching.’

Maclean began to explore digital media while still at student at ECA. All of her films are made using green screen, and

until recently she's played every character in them, though her extensive use of costumes, props and prosthetics often renders her almost unrecognisable. She loves green screen, she says, because it gives her so much control; in post-production she can 'keep messing around' with images until she's satisfied with the result. She likens her methods to painting; 'A space where you can go to town with your own imagination and invention.'



Rachel Maclean, *Spite Your Face*, February-May 2018, installation views courtesy Talbot Rice Gallery.

Maclean wants to create new worlds, and she wants them to look synthetic. Most of all, she aims to lull us into a false sense of security; here's a nice familiar story, all pink and fluffy – then wham! She punctures our complacency with something strange, shocking and often downright disgusting. She urges us to question the messages with which we are fed.

At ECA Maclean was told '*don't paint the castle*' – that Edinburgh icon seen so clearly from every one of the college's studio windows. The building had become a cliché. After a while though, she started to question why certain images become cultural short cuts. What is it that they say to people? And are we right to think ourselves 'above' them? Maclean admits to loving 'tourist tat';



'The tourist culture fascinates me.'

In Venice, thinking about the work she would produce for the Biennale, and wanting to investigate the anger and bewilderment that followed the Brexit referendum result, she soon happened upon Pinocchio, an omnipresent feature of the city's tourist merchandise;

'...his creepy wee eyes followed me around'

She had found her star. Pinocchio, a figure whose nose grew longer every time he lied, was the ideal vehicle for an examination of this new era of post-truth.



Maclean chose to install *Spite Your Face* in a church (*Chiesa di Santa Caterina*). The setting conveyed a religious sense of heaven and hell, emphasising the way in which her Pic begins as a wretched street urchin, then gradually rises to what he sees as heaven – money, status and an illusion of power – by becoming the face of a glitzy new fragrance *Untruth*. But in order

to get where he thinks he wants to be, Pic tells more and more lies, and his nose grows correspondingly longer. The church becomes increasingly flash and tacky as Pic adopts the values of a consumerist society, one whose overriding mission in life is to play on people's anxieties then sell them stuff purporting to be a cure for their worries and fears. As Pic becomes unavoidably power-mad, his nose takes on a phallic appearance, and Maclean introduces ideas around misogyny, abuse, rape, domination and violence.

Pic's good fortune (if that is what it is) does not last; he soon falls from favour and ends up back in the gutter. *Spite Your Face* is deliberately shown on a continuous loop to emphasise the Sisyphean nature of consumerism, the constant, futile, struggle for a utopian version of happiness that always appears to be just out of reach – but only just, persuading us that with a little more effort (and a lot more buying) we can reach that coveted nirvana. In a particularly telling scene, a gold and shiny credit card becomes a razor blade cutting through flesh.

Turning to her earlier works, Maclean discusses ***Feed Me*** (2015), a video that looks at youth, and especially the fetishization of childhood. In it Maclean examines children's television images (Teletubbies, Care Bears) and asks why adults revert to childhood things – onesies, infantilised adult toys, coffee cups resembling baby beakers. What is at stake for the companies that pedal this version of utopia? Smiley emojis, the reduction of complex thoughts and reactions to happy and sad faces – why do social media in particular encourage us to participate in simplistic surveys and



'feedbacks'? – and why do we co-operate instead of running screaming from the room? Corporate giants don't adopt innocent, friendly persona for the good of our health; happy people spend money. How did we become complicit with this arrangement? What made us buy (into) this false promise?

Feed Me was made just after the exposure of Jimmy Saville, a man who is often said to have committed his crimes in plain sight. In retrospect many people say they always thought he was suspect, but felt unable to voice their suspicions at the time. Celebrity fooled us; we believed the TV persona, we trusted truths that turned out not to be truths. Perhaps Maclean wants us to stop being so easily fooled.



Maclean herself is wary of social media ('I'm a terrible tweeter') and prefers to let her art speak for her. She mentions again her need to keep control, and finds people's willingness to expose so much about themselves quite odd. She acknowledges, however, that some artists use social media well. She cites controversial photographer **Cindy Sherman** as an influence (Sherman made her private Instagram

account – a collection of dramatically distorted selfies – public last year) and doesn't rule out a future Instagram project of her own.

Maclean's work in progress is ***Make Me Up***. Although feminist awareness continues to grow, Maclean says it's become entangled with corporate values; the media tell women they need 'self-empowerment' while constantly bombarding them with images of 'perfect' – and perfectly made up – models. Women are damned if they do ('no strength of character') and damned if they don't ('not making an effort' [*"for themselves"*].)

The film marks 100 years since British women gained the right to vote, and, through one of Maclean's trademark fictional narratives, it looks at the ways in which women are pressurised to comply, and the harsh judgements still inflicted on those who don't. For this project Maclean watched hundreds of homemade Youtube make up tutorials; again she examines the role of social media in feeding our insecurities, the glossy image of ourselves that we feel compelled to create.

'We've targeted some of the most damaging human potentials.'

The film is the first in which Maclean has worked with a cast of actors 'I was frustrated with not being able to see the film as it was shot', but she still loves green screen and has no intention of giving it up.



Known for her tireless work ethic, Maclean speaks often of her *need* to make things. Her advice to new art graduates is simple;

'You've got to do it because you want to do it...There will always be dark moments. You need the compulsion to make.'

The years after graduation can, she says, be very exciting – especially in Scotland, where the arts community offers plenty of support.

Asked how she feels about depicting sexual violence on screen, Maclean replies that people are now so used to being confronted with misogynistic images of women that they no

longer see them at all; her intention is to bring them back into focus. In a world where post truth has become the new normal, Rachel Maclean challenges us to think about what's really going on, to wake up and smell the corruption all around us.

Spite Your Face is at Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge until 5 May 2018. Admission is free. Please contact the gallery (0131 650 2210 or info.talbotrice@ed.ac.uk) for opening hours.

Make Me Up is a collaboration with arts organisation NVA and Hopscotch Films. It will be shown on BBC4 later this year.

Rachel Maclean's website is <http://www.rachelmaclean.com/>

With thanks to Stuart Fallon, Assistant Curator, Talbot Rice Gallery.