



## YOURS, CONSIGNED

"A busy bee, I work for love, I labour dry and wet."

- Guy Ben-Ner, *Drop the Monkey*, 2009

A 1958 letter from John Steinbeck to his adolescent son Thom recently surfaced and went viral. In response to Thom's confession of falling in love, Steinbeck described the extremes of romantic feeling. As he wrote, one is "a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance...The other is an outpouring of everything good in you—of kindness and consideration and respect...The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness..."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the enthusiasm with which this letter circulated attests to the reality that most relationships depend on a complicated balance, and there's an ever-present threat that generous and emboldening feelings will be overtaken by ego and fear. That prospect is blaringly exposed in *The Weight of Lives I'm Not Living*, featuring works by Fabiola Carranza, Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa and Guy Ben-Ner, who question art in the service of life by dredging the sediment of past choices, tracking the provisions of the sanctified contract and its reverberations through extensive networks of human and material capital. The cliché of the broken engagement is propelled into the social realm and situated as an intersection of multiple narratives, provoking questions on the institutionalized rituals we employ to characterize our choices and ourselves.

In the opening shots of *Drop the Monkey*, Guy Ben-Ner confesses to brokering its financing as a means to support his weekly commute from Tel Aviv to Berlin to see his partner. Shown in parallel montage, the film exposes a broken

promise, as Ben-Ner gradually admits that his deal marred both the relationship and the project from the start. Speaking mostly in Hebrew, the English subtitles are presented in a cadence that underscores the rhyming structure of the translation. This device calls into question its accuracy, and perhaps, the underpinning of the entire project. Would it be worse that Ben-Ner contrived the film deal as a means of visiting a long-distance love, or that he invented the story in its entirety?

Carranza trades in the detritus of lost love. Uniting five parallel narratives, her *Consignment* project was set into motion when the diamond ring owners took action to sell them through online classifieds. Hanging in the gallery window, the neon diamond icon beckons to the curious and the pawnshop savvy, though they may be disappointed that the goods cannot be viewed from the street. Displayed with statistics on their weight in carats, and one-word descriptors of the cut and clarity, the only indication of origin is to the point of original purchase. Those geographical designations (USA, Canada, Honduras, etc.) make no mention of the location where the diamonds and metals were extracted, nor do they acknowledge the lives involved in their procurement and trade. Still, the technicalese cannot conceal the overwhelming pathos of diamond rings on consignment, nor forestall questions on the countless negotiations—on the value, the terms of commitment—in which they are centered.

In *Bitch on a Bent Palm Tree* Ramirez-Figueroa further antagonizes the media caricature of Lynndie England, the still-unapologetic Abu Ghraib conspirator who persists as a media contradiction: a pixie-like female clad in army fatigues posing with a wink, wave and thumbs-up besides pyramids of nude POWs.

Jenni Pace on *The Weight of Lives I'm Not Living*

Photographic evidence of the horrors of Abu Ghraib was unveiled in the climate of video messages periodically issued by Osama bin Laden and other purported terrorists, which were quickly picked up by news outlets and replayed constantly, an early marker of the now-commonplace "viral" media phenomenon. Framed in the context of this exhibition, her ill-fated love for the married SPC Charles Graner, and his refusal to acknowledge their child conceived in Iraq, underscores the magnitude of choices made on the assumption of lasting love, and the enduring disappointment when it goes awry.

Ramirez-Figueroa seizes upon the dual nature of England's infamy (is she an aggressor or victim of a sociopath, of poverty and poor education?) to root out the still-hazy details of his family's history in Guatemala. Rumour has his ancestors, Jewish immigrants from Mexico, settling in an indigenous-controlled area in the early 19th century, and subsequently the women in his family have been likened in parochial lore to Lady Godiva, the medieval heroine who rode a horse naked through the town market to protest her husband's oppressive taxes, and for whom the furies blinded the original Peeping Tom who violated her request that townspeople stay indoors. In summoning Godiva, the artist draws a stark contrast with England, who seemingly embraced the role of voyeur and still insists that the media circulation of the Abu Ghraib photos was the real security threat rather than her own willful involvement in violating Geneva Convention protocols.

Ramirez-Figueroa crudely attached England's screeching visage to the taxidermy dog form astride the palm tree that dominates the gallery space. The tree conjures the Rococo hideousness of Saddam's palaces rising from man-made

Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa, *Bitch on a Bent Palm Tree*, 2011. Photo: Blaine Campbell

oases, cruel and un-ironic simulations of the "South" and the "Orient". These tropes of European modernism are echoed in Ben-Ner's split screen juxtaposition of the divided cities of Tel Aviv and Berlin. By collaging the European-style esplanades, parks and corner cafes of Tel Aviv with the Brandenburg Gate and Potsdamer Platz, he simulates the dissonance experienced in frequent travel. The spatial politics of the two cities, and the artist's weekly circuit between them, re-enact the Western "civilizing mission", underscoring how European social rituals and consumption habits, including the diamond engagement ring, support and sustain the colonial program.

Ben-Ner, Carranza and Ramirez-Figueroa inhabit the void between concept and content to question the social (and globally configured) conventions that come to bear on individual choice-making, an effort that John Baldessari has described as engaging in and exposing "the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of the spirit."<sup>2</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Steinbeck, John. "Letter to Thom Steinbeck. 10 Nov. 1958". *Steinbeck: A Life In Letters*. Eds. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 600-601.

<sup>2</sup> Baldessari, John. "What Thinks Me Now," *Documenta 7*, I. (Kassel: Documenta, 1982), p. 80.

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