

Can I Make You Feel Bad?

Sylwia Serafinowicz

Can I Make You Feel Bad? – asks Małgorzata Markiewicz in the title of her solo show. It is not a banal question for an artist who has spent more than a decade highlighting the problem of domestic abuse and questioning the complexity of the dynamics of the home space. Consequently, her works address the often suffocating household environment which, in popular culture, still functions as a synonym for safe asylum or, in the case of London, remains a dream for the many citizens that are victim to ever rising rent prices.

The exhibition at l'étrangère joins various threads of Markiewicz's work, from the redeveloped early series of photographs *Pinafores 2002* (2016) to the series of objects made specifically for this show, titled *Ugly Houses* (2016). In *Pinafores* the artist depicts herself wearing an apron on an almost naked body and striking poses to the camera whilst performing chores: cleaning, peeling potatoes, serving dishes. In one of the photographs, we can see the lace trim of a stocking peeping beneath the apron. In another, Markiewicz sits on a tabletop with both legs under her buttocks, looking daringly straight into the camera with a smile on her face. The artist reveals her fascination with the sexual connotations held within the cheap piece of cloth she is wearing. In a text published in her book, *House, Home, Domesticity. Re-open the House* (2013), she described how the outfit serves as a uniform, with which to perform all the functions socially defined for women - a mother, wife and a lover. Today, the subversive use of the attributes of domestic work lies at the heart of the emancipatory practices of many female artists. As pointed out by Lucy Lippard, the American art critic and theorist of conceptual art, the Women's Rights Movement, operating in the US since 1848, encouraged women to begin 'shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings—and, in some cases, keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art.'¹ Women's labour was addressed in 1972 in a milestone project *Womanhouse*, 1971–72 Feminist Art Program at CalArts, under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The apron was also famously featured in Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, a video shot in 1975.

One may question why the interest in the theme of domesticity persists. My feeling is that when it comes to socially engaged practices like these, instead of measuring them against the criteria of originality we should look at their relevance today. It is high. There are at least

two reasons behind the decision to depict household chores in art articulated by the artists. The first reason was raising awareness of the mass subordination of women within their gendered social roles of mother and housewife. The second reason, however, was the need to bring pride to women's work. The struggle is ongoing. In a recent advertisement for a Fairy cleaning product, a woman in an evening dress instructs a housewife dressed in sweatpants how to successfully 'dance away the dirt all around the house.' Meanwhile, the British supermarket, Tesco, advertises its 'EAT HAPPY' programme designed to teach children about the sourcing of food as a campaign which will 'help many girls across the UK to learn more about food and have a fun and healthy lifestyle.'²

Men also fall victims to gender stereotyping, as they are often still depicted as 'providers,' who must be successful in their occupation and show no emotions of fear or hurt. Researchers are beginning to see a relationship between the growing number of suicides amongst British men, which some MPs argue should be called a national public health emergency, and the fact that many of them do not seek help even when catastrophic events hit their lives.³ Markiewicz addresses the clash of desires, ambitions and needs of contemporary woman and men, again in the context of the household, in her most recent work – the series *Ugly Houses*. It comprises of ceramic models of houses which visibly burst under the pressure of the phallic-looking chimney placed at their centre. Markiewicz points out that although the shape of it reminds us of male genitalia, the stove itself is steeped in feminine symbolism⁴ representing women's genital tract.⁵ Home in this depiction is a place filled with tension between the heterosexual partners resulting from a mutual aspiration to dominate.

The subject of relationships is continued in a series of cobwebs made of yarn, all 2016, titled with the names of chemicals: *Chloral hydrate*, *Benzedrine*, *Marijuana*, *Caffeine*. Resembling spiders' webs, each one exhibits an original pattern. The inspiration behind this form was derived from a study into the behaviour of a spider under the influence of the above-mentioned substances. The artist produced the first web in 2004. It was white, serving also the function of a dress, and was used in a performance in which the artist herself wore it. As the artist points out, the work from 2004 was about the possibly ambiguous role of a woman in a relationship – of a victim or an assassin. In her most recent 'cobweb' works, she responds to the phenomenon of a relationship being spun between a couple under the influence of various drugs, which enhance our everyday performance and the level of satisfaction and pleasure gained in our lives. As she noted in a private conversation, feelings, such as love and jealousy, which are formative for our relationships, can also be perceived purely as chemical reactions.

The works by Markiewicz are deeply rooted in the history of feminist art and engagement, and they respond directly to the crucial issues of today, such as the underestimation of the family home as a site of violence, paired with the ongoing cuts to women's refuges and social housing.⁶ Only this month The Guardian argued that we are facing an 'epidemic of domestic abuse' in the aftermath of the controversy caused by an episode of *The Archers*, a popular radio series, in which a woman who is subjected to abuse stabs her partner with a kitchen knife. This episode triggered a massive response from the audience and resulted in raising more than £20,000 for a charity helping victims of domestic violence.⁷ However, as long as domestic violence is a worldwide issue, the voices highlighting the tensions lurking within our households, like Markiewicz's, have to be heard. Can she make you feel bad? I hope she can.

¹ Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 57.

² Julie Bentley, Girlguiding's Chief Executive, *Food Family Living Tesco*, March 2016, p. 28.

³ John Bingham, Male suicide now a national public health emergency, MPs warned, *The Telegraph*, 5 November 2015

⁴ In Ancient Greece the hearth symbolised the goddess of domesticity, home and family – Hestia. This issue is also investigated in modern anthropology. See: Janet Carsten, *The Heat of the Hearth* (Oxford, 1997) – thanks to Pooya Ghoddousi for suggesting this source.

⁵ Email exchange with the artist, April 2016

⁶ Dawn Foster, *Cuts to women's refuges are a matter of life and death*, 'The Guardian', 6 November 2015.

⁷ Victoria Ward and Sophie Jamieson, *Helen Titchener's domestic violence storyline inspires Archers fans to raise thousands for charity*, *The Telegraph*, 5 February 2016.

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