

Dominic Johnson, 'Kembra Pfahler: Rebel Without a Cock'

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the set for such an exercise: the office furniture and houseplants could easily describe a room in the civil service or the office of a lobbyist.

Prevent is a controversial element of the government's counter-terrorism strategy. Safeguarding, concerned as it is with potential rather than actual crime, is intellectually problematic in all the ways fans of *The Minority Report* (in both its Philip K Dick and Tom Cruise iterations) will recognise. These problems amplify in the culturally or racially loaded contexts safeguarding tends to occupy. In the light of hostile environment initiatives, or glib attitudes towards citizenship when its revocation presents ministerial PR opportunities, Prevent's limitations become more visible.

But the futurity Prevent concerns itself with is ideally suited to the kinds of pattern that preoccupy Khan-Dossos, since patterns loop, following the rules they prescribe. Everything fits, and each form is set by its neighbour. Such structures offer clear visual parallels for the wider questions within Prevent: issues of determinism and agency, and the balancing of freedoms against constraints. The paintings' patterns can be positioned in the tradition of the grid, too, recalling Rosalind Krauss's assertion of 'the protectiveness of the [grid's] mesh against all intrusions from outside'. Krauss's reading of the grid is full of resonances here: 'The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of centre, of inflection, emphasises not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative.' Prevent, conversely, is predicated on narrative and the idea of one thing leading to or causing another (hence, perhaps, the declaratively linear title 'There Is No Alternative'). Krauss was describing purist grids, which Khan-Dossos's grids are conspicuously not: they are concocted from the iconography of Prevent – symbols like shields, fingerprints and padlocks. But again the repetition of these shapes comes to reflect the ways symbols metamorphosise over time. It is difficult not to see the shield logos at The Showroom in a lineage of shields that links through to the crusades, giving a deeper visual history to policies which present themselves as urgently contemporary.

The history of Khan-Dossos's own practice has similar continuities with this new Showroom work. Her interest in the technologies and aesthetics of green screens or loading pages has echoes here in the temporality of Prevent, a strategy preoccupied with what is about to happen. There is clear logic for an artist like Khan-Dossos, whose work has long been situated in this generative moment, turning to Prevent as a subject. The topic is loaded with connotations about the image and its construction too: Prevent is an exercise in vigilant looking, or surveillance, so to bring that activity back into an art space is to restore it to its rightful habitat. Independent reviews speak a particular language, but Khan-Dossos

offers an alternative review which is more ambiguous and more structurally nuanced: her layered wall-paintings are screens and their subject is screening. The audience, in turn, can practise the same self-reflexivity – scrutinising a policy which places society under scrutiny. ■

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Kembra Pfahler: Rebel Without a Cock

Emalin London 1 June to 20 July

Here is a monstrously large phallus with a big bulbous head, glittering in mirror-tiles and flanked by two similarly spangled balls. A collaboration between Kembra Pfahler, Urs Fischer and Spencer Sweeney, *Disco Cock* is ornate, imposing, beautifully produced and brutally silly. The monument – the 'cock' of the title, a proxy for a 'cause' – also brandishes a few multicoloured handprints and smears: remnants from its activation by Pfahler and others (with painted bodies) at the private view. *Disco Cock* is therefore a prop for performances, a trace of prior activities and a sculptural artefact in its own right.

Pfahler is best known as a performance artist, especially for her concept band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black (TVHKB), active since the 1980s. Pfahler adopts a signature 'look' in oblique homage to Black: monochrome body paint (blue, red, yellow), knee-high black pleather boots with white laces, a giant, tousled, black fright wig, expressionistic eye make-up and black teeth. In her loud, visually explosive live TVHKB shows – typically supported by a proliferation of similarly attired performers, like strange visual echoes of her occulted self – Pfahler performs ambivalent homages to the depthless pomp of rock, lovingly reproducing its exultant spectacle (she's fun to watch) while poking fun at its vacuity and at other times filling it in. In one anthem, for example, apropos of nothing, Pfahler sings, 'Underwear drawer! Underwear drawer! I gotta clean out my underwear drawer!' In another, she appropriates Palm Apodaca's guttural, anti-capitalist, lesbian-separatist rant from the 1970 movie *Five Easy Pieces* (starring the original, luminous Karen Black), the pilfered monologue enabling a song about 'going to Alaska' to escape the moral and aesthetic decrepitude of the city: 'Man! He likes to create a stink! I mean, I've seen filth that you wouldn't believe. Ugh! What a stink! I don't even want to talk about it.'

'Rebel Without a Cock' is Pfahler's second solo exhibition at Emalin. Surrounding *Disco Cock* are props from performances (muted hints at a roller derby *Oliver Twist*, perhaps?) and a series of nine photographic collages

Kembra Pfahler
Black Cala 2009/19




made in 2009 with Andrew Strasser, which show Pfahler in full TVHKB drag (and sometimes her surrogates, Alice and Kathy, similarly attired) interacting with oversized objects – a spilled can, a painted piggy bank, a surf board – in suggestive poses that recreate or resemble LeRoy Neiman's 'Femlins'. Femme gremlins, Femlins were caricatures of pocket-sized women with emphatically simplified bodies: long black manes, a stark triangle of black pubic hair and solid black elbow-length gloves, stockings and high-heel shoes. Neiman created the fetishistic line drawings for *Playboy* in the 1950s, where they remained a regular feature for five decades: Femlins would be shown lounging in champagne glasses, playing with jewellery or money, posing and preening. In her critical rejoinders, Pfahler appears as her alter ego, whose visual effect somewhat resembles the rudimentary shape and style of Neiman's pictures. In one, Pfahler rodeos a skateboarding mouse (Stuart Little, apparently); in another, she pulls the white mouse's tail, watched over by a looming black cat. In others still, she eats a heavily powdered doughnut or prepares to dye her hair black with Color-EZ. Here and there, large blue hands enter the frame to augment the scene.

The photographs burlesque the misogyny of Neiman's imagery, retooling his fetishistic imaginings in Pfahler's Technicolor junk and kitsch aesthetic. Pfahler doesn't need to do much to expose the original illustrations' political shortcomings. There is comedy in these works, but it's


often more rarefied than the tone and effect of Pfahler's live performances: the latter, though conceptually shrewd, are uncooked, urgent and chaotic, and rarely feel arch or studied. Indeed, there is plain-speaking power in two unforced, comparatively unadorned portraits in the series, *Classic Glamour* and *Look Glamorous*, where Pfahler reclines blue and otherworldly in a red spot-lit glow. They give pleasure not because we can consume her without terrestrial distractions, but because they complement more brazenly the abrasive, antagonistic, unlaboured abandon of her live performances. In another strong image, Pfahler performs a 'butt print', presenting her blue backside to a stretched easel-mounted canvas: more akin to a manipulated document, we are pulled to one of her signature live acts (developed for Deitch Projects to create multiples), as she tightens the circle on what otherwise can seem like an elliptical relation between the glossy, restrained photographic series and her wit, chaos and sway as a performance artist. ■

Dominic Johnson runs the MA Live Art programme at Queen Mary University of London.



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