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The Artists in Her Studio (After Jane Eyre)

SAS (Sagan MacIsaac, Arielle Gavin, Sarah Butterill)

November 21 – December 13, 2014

'I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will.'

- Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

Sagan MacIsaac, Arielle Gavin, and Sarah Butterill, the cheeky all-female art collective known as SAS, play with notions of constructed identity and environment in her multi-layered, metafictional installation, *The Artists in Her Studio (After Jane Eyre)*. SAS assumes the role of a singular fictional persona by conflating three women into one character to critique outdated assumptions of female individuality, or lack thereof. She also pays tribute to the trope of the solitary artist in Charlotte Brontë's timeless classic, *Jane Eyre* (1847), one of the most celebrated literary heroines in the western canon. Influenced by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys's 1966 prequel to the novel, SAS's performance builds on the conversation of racism and colonialism addressed by Rhys, while drawing on humour and satire to unhinge flawed perceptions of gender, race and social class. Her work is an exploration of performativity and to what limit these boundaries can be prodded and pushed.

Framed as a celebrity artist, SAS has been tasked with designing an amusement park that commemorates *Jane Eyre*, complete with rides and attractions inspired by various passages from the novel. The exhibition itself features physical manifestations of her process, including sketches, models and mood boards, as well as videos of the artist in action, charting the construction and proposed inauguration of the theme park, *Thornfield Unbound*, in Whistler, B.C., in 2015. A video projection features SAS in her studio; explaining her practice, creating preliminary documents, and contemplating art in its various forms, be it the profound appreciation of a flower garden or the mentorship of a respected figure. Another set of monitors depicts the artist onsite at the theme park construction site, what Torontonians know to be the dog park at Trinity Bellwoods, just another one of SAS' many jabs at the overtly fabricated nature of her performance. The informal style of the artist's testimonials is itself a gag, existing as careless point-and-shoot recording by a studio intern and thereby exposing the seams of the artist's "genius" and process.

There are differing levels of theatrical spectacle at play within *The Artists in Her Studio*; in the exhibition itself, in which the three women occupy and perform within a fictional studio space, as well as in the scripted interviews and staged artifacts on display, all acting as markers of authentication of an event that never happened. The undertaking recalls Iris Häussler's *He Named Her Amber* (2008–2010) at the Art Gallery of Ontario¹, in which the artist hoodwinked audiences with a seemingly authentic excavation project at the Grange, a 19th-century house attached to the gallery, involving the discovery of objects hidden away by the house's servants and the "hiring" of a forensics team to assess the findings. The revelation of the project's fabricated status was met with admiration as well as outrage, and yet Häussler's institutional critique demonstrates how performance art can destabilize systems of power from within. Similarly, SAS's implementation of humour as a subversion strategy is not immediately apparent; *why do these three artists want to build a Jane Eyre theme park? Is SAS even a real collective?* Her practice inherently fosters ambiguity and expects her audience to do a double-take of sorts, blurring what resides in the realm of the real, and what belongs to her fictional microcosm.

The ruse circles back to the park's "commission" by Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, viewed by the collective as a proponent of neoliberal feminism: a postindustrial feminist movement disguised as a means of workplace empowerment for women. Sandberg's #1 bestselling book, *Lean In*, encourages women to adopt an entrepreneurial, can-do attitude in the workplace in order to attain economic prosperity, and yet it fails to address that "feminism has been retooled as a vehicle for expression of the self, a "self" as marketable consumer object".² SAS's identification of Sandberg as the park's imagined benefactor raises questions about the misguided efforts of this type of feminism to unite all women, and the artist consequently presents the theme park as a unified "women of the world" experience. SAS conceives of various rides and attractions to poke fun at the ideals of womanhood by highlighting certain flaws and stereotypes associated with women of the Victorian era. *The Red Room Hysteria Ride* "simulates the unmanageable emotional excesses Jane experiences in the Red Room [Chapter Two]," while the *Jolie Laide Unmakeover Spa* allows visitors to "achieve Jane's famed plain-featured look".³ Theme park employees even don Victorian-era garb as their uniforms, represented by a costume on display in SAS's studio – borrowed from Toronto's own Comrags, who designed the costumes for the Canadian Stage's production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

¹ Gillian MacKay, "Iris Häussler: Brilliant Disguise," *Canadian Art*, Winter 2009, pp. 82-87.

² Susan Faludi, "Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not," *The Baffler*, no. 23, 2014.

³ The author in conversation with SAS on Sunday, November 9, 2014.

SAS's installation within the Project Space features ephemera from the artist's studio, including post-minimalist assemblages, copies of the novel, and various pamphlets, buttons and didactic panels intended to recreate the "accessible" nature of the museum. Viewers are encouraged to digest the elements of her artistic process, both in her presence and absence, through mood boards corresponding to various attractions. The suggested theme park location of Whistler speaks to SAS's conception of "wholesome family fun" – SAS even enlists the help of her colleagues in Banff to shoot on-location footage featuring the towering Rockies in the background – itself a jab at the stiff disposition captured in James McNeill Whistler's iconic 1871 portrait of his mother.

SAS provides no shortage of art world jokes, and yet the exercise is not a farce; rather, it provides a shrewd critique on the supposed ideals of womanhood, the problematic shift towards neoliberal feminism, and similar issues that struggle to achieve resolution and continue to warrant critique. SAS's employment of humour and satire makes her seem naïve to these deeper issues, but by severely exaggerating certain ideals and behaviours, she alerts her audience that she is aware of her contradictions, that she is the mastermind behind it all.

- Nives Hajdin

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