

Profile

■ The Animal Bride

Gilda Williams on Lucy Gunning

'We know what animals do and what beavers and bears and salmon and other creatures need, because once our men were married to them and they acquired this knowledge from their animal wives.' Hawaiian Indians quoted by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*.

Femininity is hard to discuss in our culture, which essentially views the posture of *childbirth* as grotesquely unladylike, and it is not surprising that probing the limits of gender expectations is irresistible to so many women artists. If the women in Lucy Gunning's videos are, on the surface, typically 'girlish' – what with their love for horses, their habit of spending time alone in their rooms, their singing, their long hours in the kitchen, their playfulness – they are always revealed as existing closer to what Gunning calls neither masculine nor feminine: a non-specific third gender. Gunning's subject is not neutral but unconditioned by a phallogocentric system; she inhabits a space located 'elsewhere', in between a binary, intrinsically antagonistic view of gendered behaviour.

Lucy Gunning
Climbing Round My Room 1995



In Gunning's videos there is always a twist the size of a tornado on the conventions of femininity. In *The Horse Impressionist*, 1994, the portrayed women are not merely fond of the animals, but have actually adopted their 'unfeminine', indeed non-human, screeching sounds – remotely reminiscent of a woman in labour. As the title plainly describes, the young lady locked in her bedroom in *Climbing Round My Room*, 1995, is certainly not busy writing in her diary about her daily disappointments with boys; in the *Singing Lesson*, 1994, we are not entertained by a parlour room recital of a woman's melodious singing, but witness the untrained, off-key attempts of the artist to mimic her teacher, whose face is not that of an angel but is contorted into an unflattering grimace. In *Mouse Running Round the Kitchen*, 1994, the unseen woman at hand, the artist herself, spends the afternoon in the kitchen filming a surprisingly welcome intruder into 'her space', a mouse; and finally, the girlfriends at play in *The Footballers*, 1996, are engaged in a combative two-person football match. Expectations of the feminine are hinted at and yet thoroughly denied; the resulting pleasure, the *jouissance*, for the women on screen (often the artist herself) is consequently enormously heightened. Akin to Hélène Cixous's notion of an unhindered *écriture féminine*, Gunning uses gendering as a strategy for a kind of female-based bisexuality wherein both sexes are present without depending on binary logic.

The five women in Gunning's *The Horse Impressionists* are united in their highly observant skill at mimicking, in sound and sometimes in gesture, the scream-like neighing of a horse. Their differences within this uncannily specific niche (Gunning found them through an ad in the paper) offer a portrait of womanhood as an extremely cohesive group, sharing unexpected talents and an incomprehensible language. Gunning is careful to keep these women far from humiliation in their 'strange behaviour', always maintaining their dignity and individuality. What is revealing, however, is how the women themselves often deliberately display their embarrassment, buffering the oddness of their actions with laughter, or smiles, or simply by walking off camera. Similarly, the women in *The Footballers* repeatedly adjust their blouses in subtle, unconscious contradiction with their obvious concentration on the very physical, toughly fought match at hand; and the short-skirted performer in *Climbing Round My Room* demonstrates great skill in preventing her climb from lapsing into the obscene, the 'unladylike'. Like the women in *The Horse Impressionists*, they are somehow instinctively aware of the potential accusation that could be directed at them: that they are hysterical, not complying with the composure expected of womanhood.

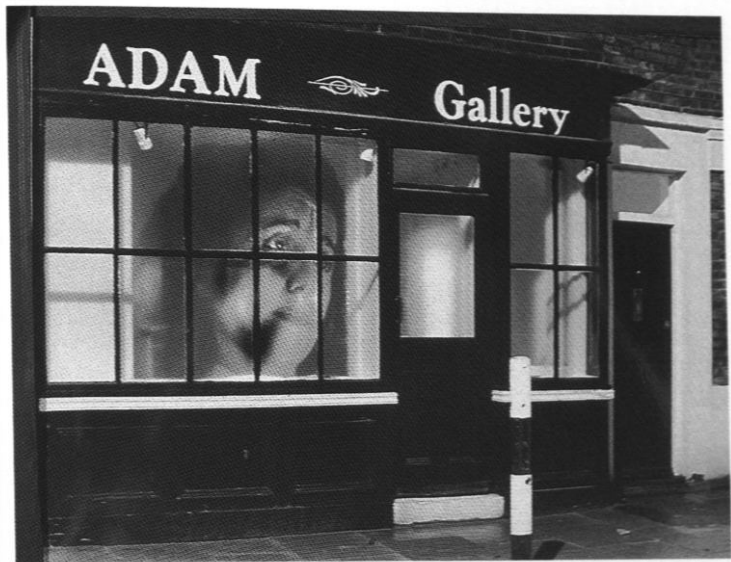
The horse, as we know, is a clichéd symbol of manhood; a teenage girl's passion for horses allegedly provides a means for her to sublimate sexual desire for a 'real' man. To be 'on one's high horse', to 'hold your horses', and to hear it 'straight from the horse's mouth' indirectly identifies such traits as superiority, control and honesty with the masculine. For Cixous, the social structures which we inhabit and which have contained women in a position of passivity are inextricably linked to language. Access to language, to a voice, to writing, is always at issue in Gunning's broad subject matter; her sounds might be eerie vocals, like the women in *The Horse Impressionists*; or they are limited to the shuffling of feet and bouncing of a ball (*The Footballers*), or the indefinable, quiet sounds of a body sliding over a shelf (*Climbing Round My Room*); or slowed down to

denied language or struggling to assert a voice, animals are the perfect analogue for Gunning's Other: neither man nor woman, the 'non-specific third gender' which asserts itself while seeking pleasure.

unrecognisable baritones in her recent video installation, *Flying*, 1996. These women all have no speaking voice. The voice was also partially denied in *Opera Singer*, 1995, an installation in the Adam Gallery window in which the image of an opera singer was projected towards the street and yet her voice was inaudible to passers-by. Most emblematic, however, is her double-monitored video installation, *Singing Lesson*, in which a woman is literally being taught to acquire a voice.

The alternatively ungainly and seductive movements of the admirably *balanced* woman in *Climbing Round My Room* describe a result-less endeavour obviously in contradiction with the (male) insistence on trophies to show for your achievements – perhaps she's pushed them off the shelves to clear her path. Literary parallels are rife in *Climbing Round My Room*: in Italo Calvino's allegorical *The Baron in the Trees*, the 12-year-old, rebellious nobleman Cosimo climbs up into the garden trees and vows never to come down – and he never does. Like the performer in Gunning's video, Cosimo is not, as he often points out, hiding from anybody; in a sense he is more on display for his odious family than ever before – certainly he has a better view from up there of *them*. And then there's buggy Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, crawling around the walls and ceiling, asserting his physical distance from any ordinary human dimension. His sympathetic sister, recently empowered through Gregor's imposed exile in his room, decides to remove 'all the furniture that hindered him, above all ... the writing desk'. Like Gunning's silent explorer, he is denied access to writing and to a voice; both have been excluded from his territorial domain.

Formally similar to *Climbing Round My Room*, Bruce Nauman's 1967-68 video *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* illustrates the risk of bored fruitlessness during the long lonely hours in an artist's studio. Lucy Gunning seems bent on avoiding that tedium, determined to site her work elsewhere: at a singing lesson or, in her recent work at the Harris Art Gallery and Museum in Preston, Lancashire, at an airplane-flying lesson. A far more cautious leap into the void than Yves Klein's *Flying* is a multi-screened installation whose central image is that of the sky framed by hope (Gunning, the student, left); wisdom (the gauges and instruments below); patience (the instructor, right) and infinity above. At one point the video camera is turned 360° on its tripod, sweeping in sky, landscape and cockpit, mirroring the circular, potentially endless movement in *Climbing Round My Room*. The mono-directional trajectory of the plane is transformed into a limitless, all-encompassing alternative; metaphorically, our Amelia Earhart, the artist, has dis-



covered a system to venture in all possible directions without spinning out of control.

Starting with the little red-dressed (though not riding-hooded) monkeyish performer in *Climbing ...*, Lucy Gunning's work is somehow fable-like, not least because of the incidence of animals in them. Animal metaphors can be both self-evident (*The Horse Impressionists*) or, like *Mouse Running Around the Kitchen*, more subtle: in this case, a fable about a kind of *shrew* puttering about in the kitchen. Certainly being trained, the subject in both *Flying* and *Singing Lesson*, is a distinctly animal occupation; by learning to fly and to sing, Gunning is well on her way to becoming, excuse the pun, convincingly bird-like. The repetitious, uneventful scenes in such videos as *Peeling an Apple*, 1995-96, wherein an elderly woman does just that, are like wildlife documentaries; the presentation of their subjects relies on the fascination with these 'distant forms of life' (animals, women) even while engaged in the most ordinary activities. Denied language or struggling to assert a voice, animals are the perfect analogue for Gunning's Other: neither man nor woman, the 'non-specific third gender' which asserts itself while seeking pleasure. ■

Lucy Gunning
Opera Singer Adam
Gallery Window
1995

Lucy Gunning will be at Matt's Gallery, London
January 22 to March 9, 1997.

Gilda Williams is a critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

Lucy Gunning
Flying 1996

