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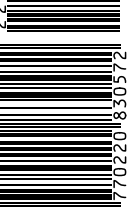


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Adelaide Biennial, Auckland Art Fair, Michaël Borremans, Candice Breitz, Bindi Cole Chocka, Teju Cole, Jack Lanagan Dunbar, Katharina Grosse, Lyn & Tony, Tom Polo, Prue Stent & Honey Long, Tin & Ed, James Turrell, Louise Weaver, Lee Kun-Yong & more

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For the acclaimed South African artist Candice Breitz, truth lives in the places where politics and pop culture intersect.
FEATURE *by* ANNA DUNNILL

CANDICE BREITZ



THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE



Candice Breitz is sending ripples of discomfort through the art world.

Partly, this is the subject matter of her artwork in the National Gallery of Victoria's inaugural NGV Triennial, a major commission that includes six interviews with refugees. Mostly, though, it's her refusal to let her political convictions remain safely hidden in the gallery.

Previously exhibited at the 2017 Venice Biennale, the NGV work is titled *Love Story* but for the first six weeks of the exhibition, it was retitled *Wilson Must Go*.

Days before the Triennial opened, Breitz was informed that the NGV's security provider, Wilson Security, is also contracted to enforce the imprisonment of refugees

in Australia's offshore detention centres. Breitz released a statement to the effect that the title of her work had been altered to *Wilson Must Go*, and would remain so until the NGV severed its tie with the global contractor.

News of Breitz's protest was swiftly picked up by European and American press, and two other international artists in the Triennial – Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Richard Mosse – immediately followed with edits to their own work. In Australia, however, both Triennial participants and press were more reluctant to engage.

"Speaking out against a powerful institution like the NGV is extremely uncomfortable and extremely inconvenient," Breitz says to me the day after her title change goes public. "I suspect, though, that being detained on Manus and Nauru is considerably less comfortable and considerably less convenient."

Indeed.

Breitz is not one to privilege her career over her politics – or to confuse them for the same thing.

"I'm a white South African," she says, "so I think a lot about how privilege extracts value." As an artist she is acutely aware of the pitfalls that can occur in making socially engaged work. She is clear that the work doesn't end in the gallery. (In late February the NGV announced that it was ending the contract with Wilson and Breitz released another statement that the title would revert to the original.)

Love Story grew out of lengthy video interviews with six individuals, all of whom have fled their countries for reasons of persecution and oppression:

Sarah Ezzat Mardini, who escaped war-torn Syria; José Maria João, a former child soldier from Angola; Mamy Maloba Langa, a survivor from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Shabeena Francis Saveri, a transgender activist from India; Luis Ernesto Nava Molero, a political dissident from Venezuela; and Farah Abdi Mohamed, an atheist from Somalia.

Filmed in Berlin, New York and Cape Town, destinations that are home to rapidly increasing refugee populations, these stories paint a global picture of the crisis at this moment in history. The work puts forth a number of questions: which stories do we listen to? In an age of distractions, where do we place our attention? Who deserves our empathy?

For Breitz, there were two priorities in making *Love Story*. The first, clearly enough, was to "create a visibility, a space in which these first person narratives could resonate." But the issue of attention is a pressing one.

"It's one thing to spend time conducting intimate in-depth interviews," says Breitz, "but archiving stories is meaningless if people are not going to listen to them and spend time with them. That's where the second dimension of the work kicks in."

Entering the installation, the first faces we see are not those of refugees, but the Hollywood actors Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore. Projected on a cinematic screen, they re-perform sections of the interviews, bringing their "extremely famous, extremely white" faces and "extremely flowing American English" to transcripts of gruelling stories relayed first hand. Edited into a slick, engrossing narrative, these stories overlay and intersect: an arc

"I THINK A LOT ABOUT HOW PRIVILEGE EXTRACTS VALUE."

built through jump-cuts, imbued with pathos by the actors' skill. At 73 minutes, this video is not exactly clickbait. Although it requires concentration and time it's accessible and immediately compelling. The work is guaranteed, as Breitz says, "to rouse your empathy, because we've been meticulously socialised to respond to the performance of emotional content according to certain conventions, often dictated by mainstream entertainment and social media."

Beyond the first space, the original, full-length interviews – most clocking in at three to four hours – are presented via an intimate semicircle of screens with headphones. Watching these interviews is a test of commitment. But who can give up the dozens of hours required to sit in the space and hear them all, especially once you've seen the edited, Hollywood version?

For Breitz this is the crux of the work. "As you move from the first space into the second space, you become almost immediately aware that you now have access to the actual people whose embodied experience you've just received in translation via Baldwin and Moore," she says. "In that moment, you become the subject of the work. The choices that you make regarding how and whether to invest your intention in one or both of the rooms, and how you move between the two radically different versions of these same narratives, is very much what the work is about."

Throughout Breitz's 25-year career, her work has often explored the same actor playing multiple roles, or the same role played by multiple actors. In *Mother and Father* (2005), the parental roles are explored through iconic movie characters: the likes of Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon, Dustin Hoffman and Steve Martin are extracted from their original Hollywood footage and presented in two mirrored



six-channel sequences. The 2008 work *Him + Her* is almost an inversion of this; in two seven-channel montages of Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep, each actor's various characters seem to be debating among themselves, performing a kind of schizophrenic internal monologue.

Often playing with notions of fandom, Breitz's 'portrait' series turns to music to examine the slippage between individual and collective identity. From Michael Jackson to Madonna, John Lennon to Bob Marley, the 'portraits' are produced through fans filmed individually singing the same song, then cut together to become a choir. In the age of the internet, it's a powerful image – separate but together.

Breitz's other installation in Melbourne, *I'm Your Man (A Portrait of Leonard Cohen)* (2017) at Anna Schwartz Gallery continues this thread. Three years in the making, the piece was originally commissioned by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal for an exhibition focusing on Cohen's life and work.

"I'm very interested in late creativity," Breitz says, "and in how being a little further along in life might move one beyond the performance of normativity. When the normative crutches of masculinity go, one must find other ways of being in the world."

Working with 18 men in Montreal (Leonard Cohen's hometown) who had

Top to bottom
CANDICE BREITZ
Profile, 2017
3 single-channel videos
Commissioned by the
South African Pavilion,
Venice Biennale 2017

CANDICE BREITZ
Factum Jacob (from
Factum series), 2010
dual-channel
installation
63 min (approx.)
Commissioned by The
Power Plant, Toronto
Commissioning Partner –
Partners in Art

Opposite
Installation view
CANDICE BREITZ
*I'm Your Man (A Portrait
of Leonard Cohen)*, 2017
Anna Schwartz Gallery,
Melbourne, 2018
Photo: Zan Wimberley

Portrait of Candice Breitz
Photo: Till Cremer

Previous page
CANDICE BREITZ
*I'm Your Man (A Portrait
of Leonard Cohen)*
(Still), 2017
19-channel installation:
19 hard drives
41 min (approx.)
Commissioned by
the Musée d'art
contemporain de
Montréal

Courtesy the artist and
Anna Schwartz Gallery





been Cohen fans for 50 years or more, Breitz asked each to sing through all eight songs of the titular album.

The men are all in their seventies or eighties, a diverse array unified by their sincerity and commitment to the music, and to Cohen's memory. Now, in videos installed on both sides of the long gallery, their voices mingle: variously husky, strong, faltering. Several mop their eyes or weep openly: the filming, by coincidence, took place shortly after the singer's death at age 82.

Cohen, of course, was a constant negotiator of creative ageing: he recorded and toured until nearly the end, his last album released only weeks before his death.

"In his lyrics, Cohen loved to reflect on mortality, on his own fragility as an older man," Breitz says with a smile, "and on the slow demise of his masculine charms. This was one of his recurring themes."

The title song of *I'm Your Man* sees Cohen humorously lay out his possible identities: a lover, a boxer, a partner, a doctor. The artwork's singers, too, so varied in their individual personas, shared a desire not often ascribed to stoic men of their

particular generation: "Many spoke of how Cohen had offered them a channel into complex emotional experience."

Both watching the singers' faces in *I'm Your Man*, and listening to the interviews in *Love Story*, I'm struck by the breadth of the emotional range Breitz explores. Using both humour and depth, her work reveals the contradictions and complexities of her subjects; in blurring the lines between their separate identities they are not flattened, but enhanced. There are multitudes within all of us as long as we, the viewers, can give them our time and attention. **V**

Candice Breitz is represented by Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, Kaufmann Repetto, Milan and KOW, Berlin.

Candice Breitz: Love Story shows at the Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen until September 9, 2018

Interview courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

annaschwartzgallery.com

goodman-gallery.com

kaufmannrepetto.com

kow-berlin.info

Top to bottom
CANDICE BREITZ
Factum Bradley (from
Factum series), 2010
dual-channel installation:
2 hard drives
78 min (approx.)

CANDICE BREITZ
Factum Hawke (from
Factum series), 2010
dual-channel installation:
2 hard drives
56 min (approx.)

CANDICE BREITZ
*I'm Your Man (A Portrait
of Leonard Cohen)*, 2017
Anna Schwartz Gallery,
Melbourne, 2018
Photo: Zan Wimberley

Commissioned by The
Power Plant, Toronto
Commissioning Partner -
Partners in Art

Courtesy the artist and
Anna Schwartz Gallery

