

Art in America



MARIA PETSCHNIG On Stellar Rays

For “Petschnigs’,” Maria Petschnig’s second outing at On Stellar Rays, the gallery underwent a fair amount of remodeling. Petschnig erected corridors of wood paneling and installed a dropped-tile ceiling, creating a cramped and sinister domestic interior. It was the latest manifestation of the artist’s penchant for installations that evoke nightmarish households. (For her previous showing in the space, “Erolastika,” Petschnig converted the gallery’s basement into an unnerving bedroom-turned-pornography studio.) The oppressive rec-room environment worked both as architectural intervention and as an apt enclosure for Petschnig’s videos and sculptures, which explore a seedy, awkward kind of eroticism.

Maria Petschnig:
Vasistas, 2013, HD
video, 5 minutes; at
On Stellar Rays.

Vasistas, one of two videos on view (both 2013), features Petschnig milling about a series of green-screened backgrounds generated from candid snapshots of social gatherings. She changes through a number of odd costumes, the clothes ranging from an octopus-like fringed tie-die top to a DIY fetish-wear ensemble of underwear and flesh-toned duct tape. Petschnig’s state of relative undress implicates both the figures frozen in the background photographs and the viewer in the gallery as voyeurs. This role-projection is underscored by numerous *Rear Window*-esque shots in which the camera peers through doors and windows from the outside in. The repeated elision of public and private spaces in *Vasistas* highlights Petschnig’s own status as an ungainly intruder within the photographic backgrounds.

A pair of sculptures in a nearby room echoed the video’s uncanny vibe. To create *Holdmetight* (2012) Petschnig tied cloth into bulbous knots, binding them with fishnet so that they resembles plush, mutant bowels that have been left to hang precariously on a wooden toilet paper holder. For *Microft* (2013), she tilted a bed vertically against a wall; twin mounds under the sheets suggest someone kneeling beneath the covers.

Past the sculptures, the exhibition ends in a dimly lit room where the second video, *Petschniggle*, is projected. Filmed in Petschnig’s childhood home in Austria, *Petschniggle* depicts a series of intimate and often opaque rituals enacted by the artist and her sister. Shot in the lo-fi, high-contrast style familiar from American Apparel ads, the video shows the sisters, clad in plastic and foam, showering together and joylessly riding a mattress down a flight of stairs. The most memorable moment is also perhaps the most characteristic: in a rapidly flickering shot one sister slowly spits into the other’s mouth, their bodies splayed on top of each other.

The video could be more disturbing than it is. The sleazy lighting, depictions of swapped fluids and autobiographical references bring to mind the popular stereotyping of Austria as a depraved land of sex dungeons. (Former Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer had to plead with the international media not to condemn the entirety of the country based on one particularly heinous case of incest that emerged in 2008.) But the sisters’ deadpan expressions and the passive, rote quality of their movements turn the video into that rare breed of joke that is simultaneously dry, crude, dark and incredibly funny. With *Petschniggle*, Petschnig’s mix of humor and disquiet comes into equilibrium, toeing the fine line between engrossing and abject.

—Matthew Shen Goodman