

Adriana Cerne

Sarah Pucill: Retrospective and Premiere The Book Club - 18th May 2010

This event was funded by the Arts Council of England as part of a retrospective screening of Sarah Pucill's films on 16mm. It was curated by Laura Kloss, and the screening was followed by a discussion with Dr Margherita Sprio.

You be Mother (1990) 7 min
Milk and Glass (1993) 10 min
Swollen Stigma (1998) 20 min
Taking my Skin (2006) 35 min

Backcomb (1995) 6 min
Fall in Frame (2009) 18 min
Cast (1999) 17 min
Stages of Mourning (2003) 17 min
Phantom Rhapsody (2010) 18 min

Twenty years work by the filmmaker Sarah Pucill was celebrated by way of a retrospective of all but two of her films on 16mm, and included a premiere of her latest film, *Phantom Rhapsody* (2010). (Films not shown, *Mirrored Measure* (1996); *Blind Light* (2007)).

In her own introduction to the retrospective, the curator Laura Kloss raises a point that seems to be a key to getting close to Pucill's body of work. Closeness relies upon how to find the right distance. The continually challenging and shifting notions of proximity and distance resonate throughout much of Pucill's work but most notably in two of her films; *Stages of Mourning* and *Taking my Skin*. The first made in 2003 just two years after the death of Pucill's partner, filmmaker Sandra Lahire, brings together archival film footage and still images of the mourned-after loved one. Exquisite moments of play, work, love, and pain, are stilled, reused, and re-fused as the film itself appears to take on the metaphoric stature of mourning; a realm through which one is moved.

Taking my Skin, made in 2006, was the next film to be made, and interestingly manoeuvres with the question of mourning to the maternal shore. The artist returns to her mother's home and films her whilst also directing her mother to take control of the camera herself and look closely at her daughter the filmmaker. Intensely, at times uncomfortably, close, the camera there searches both surfaces of skin and mirrored reflections that draw the

artist's mother deeply into the terrain of the daughter's work. So close in fact that her mother challenges the very notion of intimacy as she voices the question in the film, "Why do you want to film me so close?"

This question, raised in what is by far Pucill's longest film (35min), might interestingly resonate with the one posed by Sigmund Freud, when he asked his young patient 'Dora' why she had sat so long before Raphael's Sistine Madonna staring at her. It is perhaps, as Helene Cixous has suggested of 'Dora's' case, that we are in the presence of a moment that reveals 'the capacity for an adoration that is not empty'. Indeed the fullness of Pucill's frames, that both envelop and fragment the faces and features of the feminine, question the relation between materiality and mortality. The question of death however, as Freud suggests in his essay the 'Three Caskets', always returns us to the mother. Pucill talks about the mourning process as a type of metaphoric pregnancy, a carrying from within; this emerges from the discussion with her mother about her own experience as a pregnant and nursing mother. The continual dis-placing in the moves between closing in and holding the frame enable the film to catch slips of phrases, questions, and complaints from the mother as they spill out as excesses, small murmurings that ultimately reveal much.

Of course the notion of spillage and excess resonate throughout many of the early pieces. In *You be Mother* (1990) animation is used to uncanny effect as it disturbs, whilst at the same moment presents, the domestic site of the kitchen table-top (a recurring space for several of Pucill's films). There, the simple banality of teatime is dislodged as pouring and jarring sounds are amplified against teacups and saucers that have fragments of the artist's face projected upon them. In *Backcomb* (1995), once again strange disruptions take place at the table, which becomes an opaque ground upon which white objects of crockery and glasses filled with milk sit amidst a mass of long black hair. The sight of the hair as it slowly entangles itself through the liquids and glass is both magical and horrific. This vision delivers us into the realms of surrealism via the domain of the feminine body fragment whilst enacting the demonic undercurrent of fairytales. Like the beautiful but wrong fur-covered cup by Oppenheimer, or Chadwick's *Loop the Loop* (an entwining of pig's intestines and braided hair), Pucill forces the abject into life.

However, it is finally with her latest film *Phantom Rhapsody* (2010), which nestles between the fields of magic, theatre, and art history that Pucill appears to conjure up the history of film. The silent grainy black and white film echoes with the past differently though.

Because although the notion of Méliès' cinemagician comes to mind in its jump cuts, and especially with Pucill's appearance as a magician herself, *Phantom Rhapsody* is clearly concerned with illusion and the image as it intersects with the representation of woman throughout all of these genres. The artistic trope of the nude Venus is also a recurring focal point of the film and appears in several of her classically recognised forms; arising from the seashell; reposed on her side; kneeling down in order to look at her own reflexion in the mirror. In each case however, the phallic gaze that is endemic to these histories and poses of Venus is challenged, because in each of these set-pieces, in each pose, there is another woman to hand; another woman to re-position the gaze, and even another woman to exchange positions with, as the magician and the nude are roles that are interchangeable between the two performers. The nude figure is turned away from the camera to face the female magician who takes control of the view and the viewing; the lesbian inferences are clear but not as present as in Pucill's earlier films *Cast* (1999) and *Swollen Stigma* (1998). In this moment we may glimpse what Terry Castle refers to as *The Apparitional Lesbian*, yet the apparition herself is here playful, changing and questioning. A particularly poignant moment arises toward the close of the film when the magic passes from one of the magicians to the other, at that moment, as if knowing her visual presence is imminently fading she gestures invitations to look at parts of her body before they disappear entirely from view forever. Of course, the concept of the phantom as both a signifier of the dead and of the return of the dead in another form is not insignificant to Pucill's recent work.

As the closing film to the retrospective, *Phantom Rhapsody* draws not upon closure, but rather turns upon the fluidity and uncertainty of the image as a fixed point for identity, whether that is in terms of feminine subjectivity or lesbian subjectivity. Although the playful and unpredictable nature of the magical work echoes many of her earlier films, it also differs considerably as it situates itself and its concerns more compellingly in its silent but rapturous re-positioning of the otherwise cacophonous canons of cinema and art.

Sarah Pucill's DVD can be found here:

<http://shop.lux.org.uk/index.php/pucill-selected-fims.html>