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**MARK
BRADFORD
&
KAMBUI
OLUJIMI**
IN CONVERSATION

WHO IS
LUTZ
BACHER?

*Fiona
Hall*
Marking
Time

**MIKA
ROTTENBERG**
PEARL OF VENICE

\$9.95US/CAN





parallel logic

mika rottenberg uses
pearl manufacturing to
explore structures of creativity

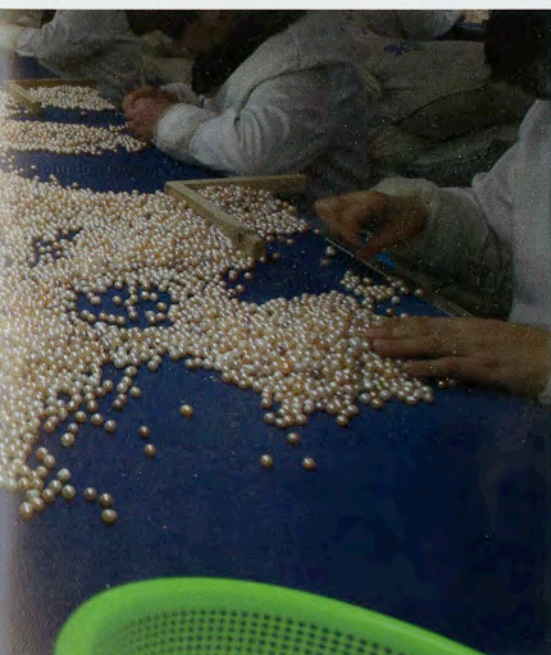
by thea ballard
portrait by kristine larsen

“It’s a beautiful thing that is born out of irritation.”

Mika Rottenberg is sitting at a computer in the bedroom of the Upstate New York home she shares with her partner and toddler, a rustic and secluded space filled with bright drawings and low-to-the-ground furniture. In the winter months, her desktop stands in for a high-ceilinged barn studio across the driveway that is, on this February day, surrounded by a foot-deep moat of fresh snow; an extra dollop of pastoral charm appears in the form of a coop of laying hens, who seem even more hesitant than Rottenberg to brave such conditions.

Footage from her new work, *NoNoseKnows*, is playing on the screen, and we’re talking about pearls. It was an interest in the small iridescent objects (though on rare occasions occurring in nature, most of those in circulation are cultured pearls, farmed by deliberately irritating oysters) that led the artist to Zhuji, a Chinese city that’s home to one of the largest pearl markets in the world. Footage filmed in and around a pearl factory there serves as the backbone of Rottenberg’s newest film installation, which premieres as part of the Okwui Enwezor–curated exhibition “All the World’s Futures” at the Venice Biennale this month. But, retracing her steps to the project’s inception, the allure of pearls comes from a self-reflective interest in creative processes, shades of which can be found throughout her oeuvre. “So many ideas are born out of irritation. I like that idea, especially thinking about art and how I sometimes feel when I’m creating a piece,” she says. “It’s a funny thing, and a very feminine thing. It has all this mucus, all this grossness, and then it has something beautiful inside.”

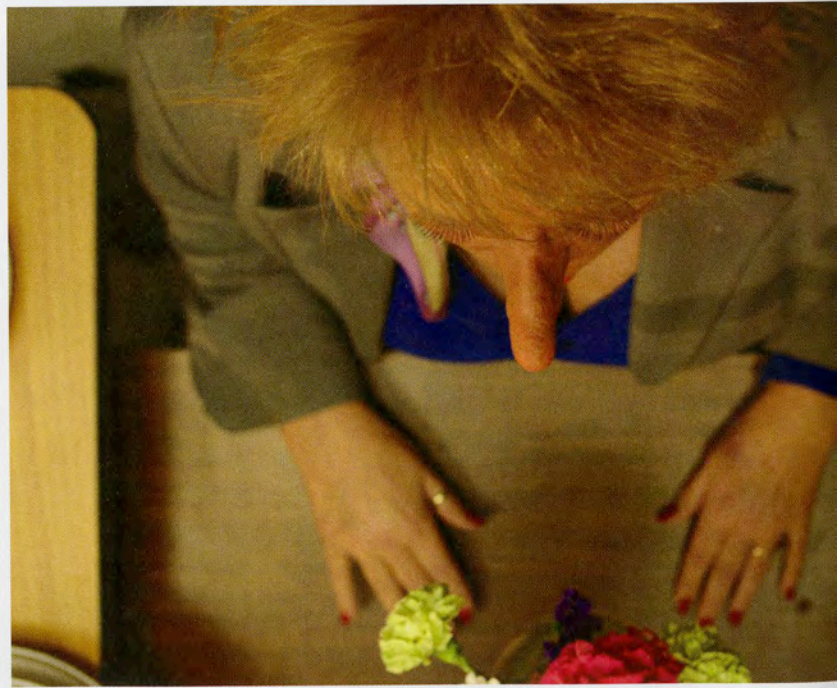
Mika Rottenberg
in her Tivoli,
New York,
studio, 2015.



“I want the spaces in the video to have a physical impact on the viewer. Once you enter a space that is a little awkward, you become more aware of where you are. You have a different relationship with what’s on the screen.”



MIKA ROTTENBERG AND ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY



Born in Argentina and raised in Tel Aviv, Rottenberg has over the past decade and a half produced a colorful and intensely visceral body of work, operating in an immersive multimedia approach with film at its center. Her videos are often displayed among sculptural objects or in specially built environments; in the case of this newest work, the film component will be entered through a makeshift “pearl shop,” housing something like 600 pounds of cast-off imperfect gems from the Zhuji factory. Women’s bodies are a recurring site of exploration—not quite in a political way, per se, but deployed as narrative tools and subjects of aesthetic curiosity. The characters in her videos are portrayed by nonactors with specific skills or extraordinary body types they have advertised online: Bunny Glamazon, for example, who has appeared in previous works and met Rottenberg in Zhuji to work on *NoNoseKnows*, her 6-foot-4-inch frame particularly out of place as she rides a motorized scooter around the city’s mostly abandoned streets. “The women in my films are, on one level, my inspiration: the way they inhabit their bodies, the way they make a living out of it,” she explains. “On the other hand, they are part of my tools, dimensions: There is a purple color, and then there is someone who is really stretched and long. On that visual level they are like textures, sound bites, or shapes.”

In addition to Bunny, who also features in typically hallucinatory interwoven sequences involving plates of noodles, a number of flowers, and an allergic reaction, shot on a set constructed by Rottenberg, *NoNoseKnows* uses footage of female workers harvesting pearls in the factory. As with her previous videos, fictional and documentary elements bleed into one another, scripted scenes adopting qualities of the real, and vice versa. “It was a little weird to work in the sorting factory,” she recalls. “It’s kind of a creepy place, but you have to be nice to the boss and the owners. I was wearing pearls”—she lifts back her sleeve to reveal a string of them around her wrist—“so I could be identified as a pearl lover.” And while she plans to remove the bracelet once the exhibition is completed, her fondness for pearls as symbols and as objects of adornment is wholly sincere. “There’s a fiction in what the pearl should be and a clash in what it is,” she says. “A pearl should be this beautiful gem. You see them at weddings, it has this kind of purity attached, both a fiction and a reality. I’m interested in the clash of where one starts and the other ends.”

In Rottenberg’s hands, this material grows dense with metaphors and parallels. For someone who likens her own work as a filmmaker to surgery, “except instead of deconstructing



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: MIKA ROTTENBERG AND LIA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK



Stills from a rough cut of *NoNoseKnows*, 2015.





OPPOSITE:
Two stills of
Bunny
Glamazon in
NoNoseKnows,
2015, and
a sketch
made during
the video's
production.

BELOW RIGHT:
Pearls from
the video
shoot in
Rottenberg's
studio.



KRISTINE LARSEN

“It’s really fun to interfere with systems that are flowing well. Putting toothpicks in the wheels. I get a kick out of the tension that produces.”

something, you construct it,” her imagery from within the factory feels particularly poignant. The labor she captures on film is odd, precise, and surprisingly delicate, with women stationed at wooden tables cutting into the pink flesh of open oysters with scalpels—also akin to surgery, “because these things are still alive,” she explains. In order to stimulate the reaction that produces a pearl, pieces of one oyster are inserted into a baby oyster, which is then returned to the water and left for five years. After this period, the oysters are opened—each yielding 15 to 20 pearls—and their output must be sorted, the majority of that production being imperfect. The artist’s clips of this process have a surreal quality, workers rapidly sifting through piles that, from afar, seem uniformly lustrous. (Though a perfect round pearl can fetch something like \$1,000, “I love the imperfect ones,” she declares.) There’s an easy link to be drawn between the process of farming pearls and the urban infrastructure that has developed to support this industry. “Zhuji is a huge city, but has areas that are like ghost towns,” she recalls of her travels. “They’re all built up, but in reality are just shells—like the oysters. It’s obvious when you look at the buildings that culture is not important, creating a community is not important. It’s about creating a community around architecture. It’s not an organically developed neighborhood; it’s quick and on steroids, in a way, which is the same as the pearls.”

Considering, as Rottenberg does, the creation of pearls as an analogue to human creativity and the development of culture, her approach to building a story or an environment seems to exist in subversive dialogue with the forms of mechanical imposition she encountered in Zhuji. Peppered with abstract-feeling imagery and jarring rhythms as they are, her films possess an inner narrative logic, albeit one that feels circuitous at times. “Everyone likes to ask why my films aren’t linear,” she says, “but they are very linear. I want to make art videos on a line that has this logic or progression. There is concern with telling a story.” Here, the interaction of biological and industrial phenomena—the fleshy live oysters, the mechanized processes, and the massive industry reliant on their still unpredictable output—provides an organizing system of sorts. But interested as she is in notions of value and production, clearly key in the weird world of the pearl market, Rottenberg seems less interested in evaluating, for example, how such an interaction might reflect similar interactions within flows of global capital. She instead zeroes in on the odd, even erotic space that is produced when nature and industry come



head-to-head. It's reminiscent of her 2010 film *Squeeze*, in which female performers exist within an architectural contraption that both compresses and electrifies their bodies—it's not a film about resistance or power, but the women's presence within the structure is undoubtedly powerful.

Describing the arc of her video output, Rottenberg turns to spatial metaphors. This most recent work in progress, she says, "has the overall structure of parallels or mirroring: between the buildings and the oysters, or the pearls and Bunny's allergy. The pieces always have a basic shape, but in an abstract way. Some have horizontal structure, like *Tropical Breeze*, where they are driving a truck and it's about these linear lanes. Some are circular, like *Cheese*. Some are vertical. The last one, *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, was kind of a solar system, based on stars and magnetic fields and electrons and all of that stuff." As she runs through these narrative shapes, she delineates them with her hands, as if the information can really be communicated only through gesture, not words. For Rottenberg, spatiality and narrative are, in many ways, inextricable. Returning to the work at hand, she posits, "The actual structure of the entire piece is like a weird building that has these different compartments or ideas that buzz around each other. In a romantic novel, the course of events is motivated by emotion, whereas in my work, it's motivated by material behavior."

I point out that her spatially engaged process seems to counter the treatment of human bodies that occurs within built environments like the developments she encountered in Zhujia, taking on the viewer's body as a primary concern. This is, she says, related to a desire to cultivate a specific sort of attention, elaborating, "I want the spaces in the video to seem real, to have a physical impact on the viewer. Once you enter a space that is a little awkward, you are already more aware of where you are. Then you see spaces in the video and it brings you back to yourself, in a way, because you just experienced this spatial thing. You maybe have a different relationship with what's on the screen."

Still, what grounds not just her video works but her sculptural objects and bubbly abstract drawings as well, is a continued sense of pleasure in both creation and disruption—a fondness not only for the pearl but for the irritation the oyster experiences to produce it, and for participating in (and helping to generate) the bizarre fictions that float around both. "It's really fun to subvert or interfere with systems that are flowing well," Rottenberg says. "Like putting little sticks or toothpicks in the wheels. That's a thing I get a kick out of, the tension. I'm always interested in the perverted side of reality." MP

"There's a fiction in what a pearl should be, and a clash in what it is. It has this purity attached, a fiction and a reality. I'm interested in where one starts and the other ends."



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Stills from
NoNoseKnows,
2015.

