No images are visible during the opening sequence of *Bunny Girl* (2016), by California performance/video artist Monet Clark. Instead, Clark provides the most basic of sounds; a steady, syncopated clip-clop and the swish of fabric, sandy and hollow, like a lone Appaloosa trotting up a gulch in a Howard Hawks western. Riding over the black screen are credits, simple and white, and Clark leaves us with these for a beat. Then it’s a hard cut to a bright, sunny exterior, the shoulder of a highway in the High Sierras, and we can finally see who’s been making all the racket: it’s Bunny Girl, teetering down a road, tackled-up in white lingerie, fishnet stockings, pink stiletto heels, the classic bunny drill. But something about Bunny Girl’s context is off. Distinct alterations affect her traditional bunny attire: her black fishnets have a rip; her stiletto heels, one size too large, wobble precariously on the gravel of the emergency lane; her trademark bunny ears aren’t perky and upright—they’re flopped down, clinging close to her face, reminiscent of those lop-eared bunnies at the Benton County Fair. Like Donny Kerabatsos in *The Big Lebowski* (1998, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen), this manifestation of Bunny Girl is distinctly out of her element; we’re more accustomed to watching her serve cocktails and nuts at the Playboy Mansion, flirting with Jack Nicholson and Bill Cosby, vampy but innocent, a brightly colored bauble on Hugh Hefner’s arm, the erotically fabulous but nevertheless submissive girl next door. In this subtle stylistic turn, Clark hijacks the traditional, chauvinist Playboy narrative and alters its setting, hobbling unsteadily down Highway 50 ten miles south of Tahoe, the muscles of her back tightly bunched, cheerfully but anxiously looking over her shoulder as the wheels of semi-trucks and sports cars roar by. Bunny Girl’s trademark ears and tail may comprise a hackneyed symbolic system with which we have long grown familiarly contemptuous, but all the familiar contempt in the world doesn’t debarb her peril, and from the video’s outset we can already sense the moral-ethical imperative of Clark’s narrative set-up: what happens to little bunnies who stray too far from Farmer McHeffner’s Garden and find themselves caught on this high-speed asphalt patch?

In that sense, Bunny Girl has good reason to be anxious, though she never seems truly scared; it’s simply in a bunny’s nature to be fidgety. But her journey’s just begun, and this isn’t the only scene wherein Clark places Bunny Girl (played by the artist herself) in a Californian landscape that seems alternately hostile and sublime. As the video progresses, Bunny Girl clambers over fallen pine tree trunks in the Sierras, crosses a salt slick in Death Valley, whirls in a “superbloom” of primrose and notchleaf phacelia in the Mojave Desert, vamps beside the decommissioned Rancho Seco nuclear power plant, romps with doomed lambs at a Nevada City slaughter farm, trips out beneath a Richard Diebenkorn pastiche of Emeryville cloverleafs, and ultimately finds herself on a series of broken roads that empty into the coves of the Still from *Bunny Girl* (2016) by Monet Clark
Marin Headlands, where she dances to the crashing surf and end credits. As she briefly and delicately occupies each of these dystopian/utopian tableaus, the colorful, opaque quality of Clark’s video is overlaid with found footage, sequences of environmental catastrophes and cultural strife: whales dying, crop-dusters spraying pesticides, protesters waving signs. But somehow, in the foothills of the headlands, she’s a different bunny girl. Some of the character development takes place in the decomposition of her couture; zig-zagging dizzyly toward the coast, her ensemble becomes increasingly frail, her ears droop more than ever, and the tattered fishnets billow beneath her ankles. Yet dancing beside the surf in her ravaged outfit, there is something heroic about Bunny Girl, and while I can’t quite label this video an empowerment piece, there’s no doubt that Bunny Girl has reached an affective apex of some sort.

It’s one of those performance videos I’ve watched many times, but still don’t know exactly how I feel about—which only makes me want to watch it again, if only to see what I missed. There is something about Clark’s rendition of Bunny Girl that reminds me of the lady in the radiator in David Lynch’s Eraserhead (1977); her eerie, cheesecake expressions and outstretched arms pantomiming Marilyn Monroe as stiletto heels crunch into the delicate skulls of fetuses. But the lady in the radiator is vaguely menacing. There’s nothing ominous about Bunny Girl, though there is plenty about her that is abject and out of place. Perhaps I’m simply entranced by the ambiguity of the character, caught in a nameless sexual pageant, surrounded by a landscape that is clearly not her home. Is she supposed to be funny? Sexy? Scary? Vulnerable? Powerful? All of the above, twined into an arbitrary landscape; namely, her relationship to the dystopic events in the surrounding landscape, for that matter, which, although unforgiving and furtive over-the-shoulder glances, plunging the gaze of her viewers into discourse that is, at the very least, intersubjective—and at best bears the potential of transsubjectivity, a term I do not use in the Hegelian sense (as in “trans-subjective realism”), but rather to indicate the ambiguous zero-point at which malleable yet entrenched subject positions can be confronted and changed in abject discourse.

One cannot possibly consider the discourse of abjection without a theoretical nod to French psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva, who, in Powers of Horror (1982), describes the dialectics of abjection not as a closed circuit of incrimination, disavowal, and pity, but rather “a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence”—and in so doing, creates the possibility that others might find one, too. In that sense, the discourse of abjection turns the semiotic tables on the abjectifier—as well as on any audience who watches, voyeuristically, the abjectifier/abjected discourse. All of us are aware of our potential abjection in the face of the cultural symbolic, inasmuch as each of us are, at any moment, subject to alienation and exile from the symbolic order (Lacan always looms behind Kristeva’s extrapolations of abjection), the semantic lexicon within which we attempt to enunciate our desire, and are constantly reacquainted, through the limitations of language, with the fact that we never truly get it—not completely, not permanently, not unconditionally. Following Lacan’s conceptualization of jouissance as a penultimate state, symbolically indicated but never physically experienced to its end (which would result in annihilation), Kristeva suggests abjection resides at the liminal edge of jouissance, observing that “jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such” by providing a space for a “divine alienation,” in which the subject:

is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from finding by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and unwilling ones.

There are always strings attached when it comes to experiencing bliss beyond measure. One problem Lacan articulates, in “God and the Jouissance of Woman,” is the inability of our symbolic order to adequately describe jouissance, a state he attributes to mysteries such as Hadewijch d’Anvers, Saint Thérèse, even himself; visionary prophets who “are experiencing it but . . . know nothing about it.” In Lacan’s treatment, jouissance becomes a flavor you can taste but never completely swallow. Certain nuances you might
remember clearly: it tasted like strawberries, the sweetness made you cry; it reminded you of your mother, a special day, the metallic scent after a hard rain, or the ringing of bells. But to immerse oneself in jouissance is to be encompassed and subsumed by waves of sheer experience, the dissolution of the metonymic order, until all that remains is the Other and its declarative, of the facticity of my gaze. Is she a simple bunny, innocent and good, even naive, benignly inferring that all of us live in a confrontational environment, constantly in threat of being devoured by the predators sloshing and sneaking at the periphery of our vision? Or is there something deeper at play—not merely Bunny Girl’s insistence that we are all bunnies seeking pleasure in an arbitrary landscape, but its repeated emphasis that Bunny Girl is neither pawn nor victim? “We all have weaknesses,” Clark noted in a recent personal interview, explaining that her art often deals with “the juxtaposition of opposites, weakness with strength,” but adding that she does not “see weakness in Bunny Girl; [she sees] her struggling with the status quo and having a reawakening when she gets affected physically, emotionally, mentally by the [toxicity] of the planet. That could be literal, like she gets sick from it . . . so physically taxed and compromised and the weight of the tragedy of it hits her.” But more importantly, Clark asserts, Bunny Girl alludes to “this idea of the surface we present as humans and the deeper truth beneath the surface”:

In the opening of Bunny Girl, we come upon her as she is unraveling [but is nevertheless] daring to set out on this kind of vision quest into nature, coming from civilization and her perfect surface. In the process of the film and the journey she finds a deeper well of strength. By the end, the bunny suit is not even what you see as much as her transformation in character. She’s still sexy and utilizing sexuality as a power, but the ditzy vulnerable bunny has given way to a woman who knows her worth, her value and what her role is [in] changing the course of the world, which is headed towards a dead end for humans if she doesn’t.6

Can one little bunny actually change the world a nibble at a time? In light of our nation’s recent political upheaval, this question seems apt, as political scavengers like Steve Bannon and Ben Carson prepare to follow Donald Trump into the White House. The political ascension of the alt-right has been heralded by the media as an occurrence that may well initiate the wholesale destruction of the human rights, freedoms, and even livable lives (to borrow a term from Judith Butler) we have come to identify with liberal democracy. Videos like Bunny Girl suggest there are numerous ways to resist repressive political forces, a multitude of transsubjective interstices in which power relations are negotiated. Clark regards the figure of Bunny Girl as “heroic,” noting the character “keeps going [and] even though she is wearing this costume and playing the roles expected of her, she is really playing a role versus being it . . . she knows it’s all roles, even being in a human body, if you get esoteric about it . . . She finds where it suits (pun intended) and where it doesn’t.”7 In that fashion, Bunny Girl suggests there is strength in vulnerability, particularly when “we lay down all of the ego-identified reality and get to the truth, in the meltdown—via broken hearts, or physical deterioration, or mental break[downs], or the throes of the creative process when it’s not guided by the head.”

Clark quickly adds that she didn’t begin filming Bunny Girl with that underlying message in mind: “I literally had no idea what I was making as I was shooting. It became crystal clear what it was by the time I got to filming the end, which was the only planned scene.”8 Perhaps this artistic method of “unplanned approach” is a prime way to yield a video that embodies revolutionary politics without turning didactic; I have seen a similar approach work for Iraqi installation artist Adel Abidin, for example, whom, as long as I have known him, has never planned a thing but often emerges (at the very last minute, to the consternation of his sponsors) with outcomes that are gracious, humorous, thought-provoking, and wickedly critical in terms of political satire. While Abidin isn’t an artistic savant by any extent of the imagination (he is savvy and
sharp), he nevertheless relies on a chaotic, precarious stance to save his bacon every time—and when it doesn’t succeed, his work can appear short-sighted or dumb. Similarly, the work of artists with whom Clark studied at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) during the 1990s often prioritizes incident and risk; this includes performances by luminaries such as Tony Labat’s Fight: A Practical Romance from 1981, Paul Kos’s Gargoyles VII from 1985, and Jan Jalbuena’s In The Pink from 2005.

Clearly, much of the appeal (and peril) of performance art lies in its site-specific volatility, its dependence on artistic receptiveness to unpredictable outcomes. One can never tell what audience members—particularly the unintended audience and ancillary participants in a piece—are going to do as the piece progresses, just as you can never anticipate how they’ll react to whatever intersubjective and even trans-subjective discourse a performance plunges them into. What if Chris Burden’s studio assistant in Shoot (1971) had accidentally blasted him in the head instead of the arm? What if audience members witnessing Karen Finley’s naked 1990s chocolate-smearing performances from 1990–91 decided to walk onstage to lick the Karen Finley’s naked 1990s chocolate-smearing performances in the head instead of the arm? What if audience members witnessing Tony Labat’s Fight: A Practical Romance from 1981, Paul Kos’s Gargoyles VII from 1985, and Jan Jalbuena’s In The Pink from 2005.

Gargoyles VIII

Bunny Girl

Yet the aspect of sexuality, while always present in Clark’s work, is neither the perpetual nor the essential focus. In the performance/video Dakini (2011), for example, Clark poses at the center of a large, blue, plastic lotus blossom in a form-fitting black dress, her neck draped with bone medallions carved into skulls (with matching Tibetan headdress). Clark’s body is sensuous, and her ritualistic gestures place her in a state of vulnerability once more, not merely because she looks delicate, but because she is dealing in spirituality, that most conflicted of stances, regarded with skepticism in artistic and intellectual circles. Of course, numerous celebrated critics have commented on the spirituality of minimalism, the California Light and Space movement, the situationists and other artistic movements whose conceptual outcomes approach the sublime. The ritualistic aspect of performance art is nothing new, either, as Finley’s chocolate smearing, Ono’s cutting, and Vito Acconci’s masturbation beneath the gallery steps (in Seated from 1972) have at
turns been described as (post)modern ritual. It isn’t so much the ritualism, healing, or spirituality that audiences have grown jaded about, then, so long as the healing or spirituality is an implicit part of the work rather than an explicit artistic goal. But if an artist directly claims spiritual status—as healer, shaman, priestess, nature goddess—a “modern” sense of skepticism seems to kick in, and the work is snarkily disavowed as overly theatrical or naïve. Clark seems at least nominally aware of this situation when she describes her performative rituals as “standing in contrast to western and patriarchal ideologies, which separate parts from the whole,” arguing that her performances:

challenge the influence these ideologies have on critical theory and contemporary feminist discourse. [These rituals] seek to remedy the separation of the mind from the body, symptoms from their cause; the energetic from the physical; humanity from nature; the masculine from the feminine; individuals from each other, etc. They further function as a portrait of Californian subculture . . . by . . . satirizing politically correct social etiquettes, as well as . . . spiritual correctness.10

As I have argued, an aesthetic of risk runs high throughout Clark’s oeuvre, and, when combined with acts of spiritualism, her pieces become a sort of spiritual wager, acts of faith that testify to the potential of unverifiable powers to alter or shift our rational, visible, material order. According to Clark, Dakini is a “water ritual” that juxtaposes “sincerity with irony,” a ritual that:

utilizes technology as a conduit to deliver the energetic and spiritual structure set up in the ritual. It functions to transmute any life condition or ailment which the viewers may choose to relinquish into its matrix. The piece stands in contrast to misapprehensions within the western/patriarchal perspective. It points towards the efficacy of indigenous people’s healing practices and shows respect for the feminine. It employs the science of eastern Raja (mind) yogic training. It displays the day to day impact of the mind/body connection, as well as the implications posed by quantum physics on the energetic nature of all matter.11

Naturally, some viewers might be skeptical about whether Clark can actually pull this off, and I sometimes wonder if she has a touch of skepticism herself, inasmuch as her performative rituals seek to “saturize[ ] politically correct social etiquettes.” But that’s a minor point. The element of satire merely indicates significant power arrangements are afoot, inasmuch as satire relies on critiquing entrenched systems of power. This returns me to the discomfiting aspects of spiritualistic artistic praxis, and an attendant cultural skepticism from its recircuvis, a savvy snidiness that’s emblematic of our (post)millennial, (post)Marxist malaise. Since the late 1800s, when Sir James George Frazer and Marcel Mauss, following in Emile Durkheim’s structuralistic footsteps, began formally excavating the social praxis of magic and religion, scholars have remarked on the apparent “need” for scientists to disavow the roots of their own, honorable family tree in such disreputable branches as poetry and alchemy.12 In this dysfunctional binary relationship, magic and spirituality have long been positioned as the abject “others” of science, disavowed as inferior on many levels: less smart, less rational, less provable, less profitable.

Returning to Kristeva, science vs. spiritualism presents another abject binary of sacred vs. profane, wherein lofty scientific brains protect their sacred order by deriding their profane, magical others as throwbacks to a primitive era. As noted Romanian theological scholar Mircea Eliade observes in The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (1959):

[Man] cannot utterly abolish his past, since he is himself the product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied. To acquire a world of his own, he has desacralized the world in which his ancestors lived; but to do so he has been obliged to adopt the opposite of an earlier type of behavior, and that behavior is still emotionally present to him, in one form or another, ready to be reactualized in his deepest being.13

By Eliade’s rationale, “man” shouldn’t have been in such a hurry to give his spiritual legacy away. Of course, Eliade’s theory is rather black and white. It’s dangerous to traffic in binaries when referring to abj ect discourse, as binary oppositions are overly reductive and exclusive—man is clearly not the flip-side or “opposite” of God, just as woman is not the opposite of man, postfeminists are not the opposite of feminists, postmodernists are not the opposite of modernists, and so on. Similarly, the liminal edge of feminist art is not masculine art, but rather an interstice where sexual politics are negotiated alongside the process of sexual subjection in general. Like the dysfunctional paradigm of science vs. magic, feminist critique did not remain locked in binary opposition, wherein second-wave champions engaged in mortal combat with an Evil Patriarchy dominated by Bad Men; instead, feminism continues to offer a deeply emergent and nuanced critical discourse that analyzes force relations in which all are imbricated and imbricating.

Ultimately, there is no separable abject other to any given subject position; rather, there are many abject negotiations at any given time, each with their own entangled interrelationships, simultaneously disavowing and embracing others. That said, health vs. sickness is another reductive binary that seems perilous for artists to engage, all too often resulting in didactic work and hackneyed tropes; paintings that look like wounds, limping bodies, dubious substances in jars, melancholy soundtracks. In that regard, Clark’s performative healing rituals stand in a class of their own, and some of her most riveting early works chronicle her struggles with the neuro-immune illness that devastated her body, yet proved impossible for Western medicine to diagnose. Writing in Hyperallergic, Peter Dobey, in “The Fine Line Between Sexy and Sickness,” characterizes Clark’s photodocumentary series Poisoning/Phoenix, Performance Documents (2001/2006–08) as “documents of her life, both real and projected,” in which the artist pairs images of herself “during bouts of illness with photos that show her in relative health, posed in a sexualized, cliché manner.”14 Suggesting the effectiveness of Poisoning/Phoenix “hinges on [Clark’s] relentless sincerity,” Dobey praises Clark for being willing “to admit her own complicity in the very systems and ideas that she critiques.”15 Unlike Dobey, I’ve never held much stock in sincerity as a category for artistic valuation—it’s an unreliable benchmark, easy to counterfeit, and if a piece doesn’t work, all the sincerity in the world won’t help it. But I do concur with Dobey’s observations on the concept behind Poisoning/Phoenix, wherein:
As is the case with her later works, *Poisoning/Phoenix* features the artist as our gentle guide into the world of abject discourse. It is within this context, at once diaphanous and intimate, that we seek our impossible healing—impossible because we live each day in the face of our own mortality, and there is no healing ritual in the world that can get us beyond that end-point, unless we intend on healing our relationship to death, accepting its challenge, its dominance, knowing we must eventually open and surrender. No matter how the cards are stacked, during the brief time we are here, we are touched by the liminal edge of an ambiguous, silent “everything else” that encompasses and defines the subjective topographies of ourselves and our others. We are not removed from this everything else, but just past the point where its opaque edge brushes up against us, there is a limitless expanse we will never touch—the expanse on the Other’s side.

What makes Clark’s work so compelling is her ability to bring us into abject discourse by teasing out the nuance and difficulty in subject positions that are commonly taken for granted, and thereby transmuted into abjection. Even the most banal subject positions can be difficult and dangerous, no matter how long they’ve been depicted as immutable. Bunnyhood, girlhood, motherhood; each of these subject positions offers a case in point, particularly in light of their critical consideration in women’s studies, of all places, which, until recently, was so restrictive that scholars in girl studies and motherhood studies found it necessary to establish their own epistemological citadels. It seems ironic that institutionalized women’s studies pushed such central figures as the girl and the mother to the fringes of the feminist canon by subjugating them into sub-studies, women’s studies pushed such central figures as the girl and the motherhood are positioned as alpha and omega, beginning and end—when in fact they are neither.

If I were forced to situate Clark’s work in any particular genre, it would be Girl Art in the best and most liberal of senses. So much revisionary potential of the canon? Can it be subverted to interesting ends or turned to pleasure? As far as *The Girl* is concerned, the canon is only useful if it can make something change. Money, power, prestige, the high regard of one’s peers; none of these matter if they cannot be used to do something fun, something crazy, something different that rocks the boat and wakes people up. But if there is no one, singular “type” of woman, as Butler (and many others) have so convincingly argued, then there must also be more than one type of girl. So what type of girl is Bunny Girl, and what type of artist is Monet Clark? Although she identifies as a feminist, Clark’s ideas about the “fit” of her work with feminism are interesting:

I see an evolution in feminism and I definitely lean more towards the later [manifestations] because I’m far more radical in my view of gender and sexuality than the first feminists who too grossly generalized and had some of the puritanical American stuff going on there. I’m still thinking, and btw I’m into some of the ideas of 4th wave [feminism] because technology and spirituality are my allies...  

Like Clark, I’m still thinking, particularly when it comes to the ongoing propagation and revitalization of feminism and feminist art. The fact that feminism is still deeply emergent means it’s rhetorically fresh and spry, with an ability to account for more subjective possibilities rather than fewer. In these uncertain days before Trump and his all-right collision stride into the Oval Office, tails lifted in self-congratulatory pride, we need all the hope we can get—and, like Clark, I remain optimistic about our chances. Not because I have any particularly good reason to be optimistic, but because I have no choice. It isn’t in my character to capitulate, to roll over in the grass and let the wolves sink their chops into my backside. That’s not what wild bunnies do. We’ve got defenses of our own; legs, ears, and thighs; we’re agile and observant; we’re good at evading assault. People who think of bunny girls as small and quiet and cuddly have got it all wrong. Those would be tame rabbits, accustomed to living in cages or hopping across the living room floor. Out here in the wild, we’d never have lasted so many generations if we weren’t good at turning the tables now and then.

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