EXHIBITION REVIEW

Rineke Dijkstra: Rehearsals
MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM
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When Gianfranco Rosi, director of Fuocoammare (Fire at Sea, 2016) explains, “My goal is not to deliver a message or defend a theory. The goal of my film is not to inform. We are not lacking data, but they crush our perception and our emotions concerning the real,” he might be speaking for Rineke Dijkstra. All of Dijkstra’s work to date reveals that she turned from commercial photography toward portraits, in her own words, in order to produce photographs with something more “substantial.” She offers viewers an opportunity to sharpen our perceptions and our emotions with two absorbing videos presented in the exhibition Rehearsals (created in 2014 for Manifesta 10: the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in Russia), and shown recently, for the first time in the United States, at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Each of the two videos is shown in a separate room. The three-channel video The Gymschool, St. Petersburg (2014, 15 min., 16 sec.) features eleven different girls rehearsing an astonishing and demanding set of contortions: supine with chest on the floor and body bent so that feet touch the floor in front of the head; sitting on the floor with legs extended in opposite directions until they form a 180-degree angle; or in extreme backbends, among many other poses. Each girl is shown from three angles, framed at varying distances. Most of the time the reed-like girls, like many of Dijkstra’s portrait subjects, are shown isolated in the space around them. The photographer pulls in at the end of the last sequences, but only enough to cut off a bit of the performing gymnast’s feet. The photographer is precise—she uses a 4 x 5 camera for still subjects, and that aesthetic carries over into the stable camera and minimal movement in the videos, allowing us to concentrate on the subjects, and calling attention to the edges of the frame. Dijkstra uses only ambient sound, often the sound of the girls’ feet, hips, or thighs thumping on the floor as they perform their movements. Moving from one girl to another, and filming the space in between, she cuts each gymnast out, leaving a momentarily empty frame, and deliberately replacing one gymnast with another. They each wear a neutral expression, or what Martha Graham called the dancer’s smile, which hides any evidence of their physical exertion and does not distract in any way from their technical mastery of the routines.

Throughout her career, Dijkstra has sought the moment when a portrait subject reveals something close to what might be a “true self,” existing beyond layers of social and cultural constructs and performances. Portraits in the West have always been the site of ontological propositions about the individual, a concept subject to endless reconsideration and often, in modern philosophy and theory, inclined to disappear altogether, when consciousness is defined as being a process of cultural production. Representations of women have long been, except for notable exceptions, the province of men; portraits by women implicitly renegotiate the boundaries of the self and other, subject and object. Dijkstra seems to record not just the physical person, but oscillations created by these fluctuating boundaries between the photographer and her subjects. Paradoxically, in the case of these gymnasts, whose poses are strikingly unnatural, she has been “trying to find a natural pose,” by setting up situations that encourage her subjects to drop their feelings about the camera and about how they will be represented. She often photographs children because children are “not pretending to be somebody else,” or in the language of gender theory, they have not yet accepted the social and cultural constructions that will define them. Because they are often young, the subjects of her portraits often convey a quietly liberating sense of potential, as if all the emotions of life, as they appear on the human face, are yet to come. Rehearsals is an apt title; these young gymnasts will perform many more roles in their lives.
And viewers are absolutely free to arrive at their own conclu-
sions because Dijkstra shows us what is in front of the camera, 
but gives no other information about rhythmic gymnastics and 
the arduous discipline to which these young people must sub-
mit to achieve these poses, including any suggestion that there 
is something grotesque and problematic in training these young 
girls to twist their bodies into knots.

The single-channel video Marianna (The Fairy Doll) (2014, 
19 min., 13 sec.), shown in another room, presents one young 
girl rehearsing a dance from Josef Bayer’s 1888 ballet Die 
Puppenfee (The Fairy Doll), which she will use as an audition 
to the Vaganova Ballet Academy. Although Dijkstra varies the 
distance between her subjects and the viewer in both sets of 
videos, Marianna is still alone in the space; she moves over 
and over again from the back of the rehearsal room to the 
front, executing a complicated set of steps and performing the 
traditional theatrical expressions, including an overly charm-
ing smile, each time. The room is an unrelenting pink, and she 
wears pink tights, a pink dance skirt, and a pink leotard. The 
environment, despite its homey cuteness, seems overwhelm-
ing, in a similar way that the sea seems to loom in Dijkstra’s 
1992–96 Beaches portraits (not on view in this exhibition). 
We know many other young dancers have worked very hard in 
this room. We hear the perky music and the coach’s demanding 
voice, correcting every detail in Russian, as Marianna practices 
the phrase over and over again. The teacher’s insistent direc-
tions seem like the commanding messages we receive from our 
culture. Most of the time we aren’t aware of these relentless 
instructions—yet we obey, even with a mixture of emotions, 
just as willingly as the young dancer does.

A similar ambiguity exists in Marianna as in the Gymschool 
video, between our wonder at the rigor of the dance phrase 
and the abilities of the dancer, and our simultaneous sense 
that there is something problematic about such perfection and 
the training to which she is subjected. In this case, in contrast 
to the gymnasts who must keep a neutral expression, the girl 
must practice a range of theatrical facial expressions as she 
perfects the role of a rather cloy doll. The compelling, even 
subversive, aspect of this video lies in the other more immedi-
ate feelings that sweep across Marianna’s face when she is out 
of character, between repetitions of the phrase she is rehears-
ing, while she is standing and listening to the teacher. We are 
amazed not only by her abilities with the rather difficult allegro 
passage, but by her concentration, patience, and good nature as 
she works to inhabit and bring the fairy doll to life.

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NOTES 1. Gianfranco Rosi, Above Sea Level: A Notebook on the Films of Gianfranco Rosi, ed. Carla Cattani, 
Monica Moscato, and Giovanni Marco Piemontese (Rome: Istituto Luce Cinecittà S.r.l., 2016), 40. 2. Rineke 
Dijkstra, unpublished video interview by curator Lisa J. Sutcliffe, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, 
Wisconsin, September 10, 2016. 3. “In all of us who perform there is an awareness of the smile which is 
part of the equipment, or gift, of the acrobat. We have all walked the high wire of circumstance at times. We 
recognize the gravity pull of the Earth as he does. The smile is there because he is practicing living at that 
instant of danger. He does not choose to fall.” Martha Graham, Blood Memory (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 
44. 4. Dijkstra, unpublished video interview by Lisa J. Sutcliffe. 5. Ibid.