

Rocket Man on a Suicide Mission

by Emma Kemp

You enter the house on Guthrie St. via a small flight of stairs and descend into the backyard the same way, where bright fluorescents illuminate the free-standing structure that is *House Guest*. Nina Sarnelle's solo show *Dog Dream*, her first independent offering outside the Institute for New Feeling, begins in video, where a flatscreen TV hangs eye level from a tree. The short, looped set is a kaleidoscope of portraits without introduction: here is a woman with blue rimmed glasses shopping at a farmers market. She faces the camera straight on, close-up. When she speaks it is to recite one sentence: "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." The muscles around her eyes contract and then loosen. Next, a man in a car wearing a mechanics uniform. His eyes move left to right as he speaks, as if following a teleprompter: "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." His face remains stoic. A woman in bed, stretching: "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." And so it goes on. In a succession of medium to close-up shots, Sarnelle's friends, neighbors, acquaintances and colleagues recite the now infamous utterance of Donald Trump at his first major speech before the United Nations last year. The video frames and replicates an absurdly cavalier remark about the decimation of an entire population. We observe the physiological burden of saying it out loud—shoulders stoop, eyes squint, mouths wrinkle—and along with the subject behind the camera, we embody the slip from the U.S. as "it" to "we," how the external becomes us, a novel cannibalization. We are reminded too of our desensitized relationship to profoundly inconceivable rhetoric; Sarnelle includes a few seconds before each recitation and a few seconds after, documenting preparatory B-roll or the speaker resuming their daily activity, so that the absurd penetrates the casual where it coexists momentarily.

There's a couple sculptures hanging in the trees, and an audio work buried in the garden. Headphones coming up from the ground transmit lush beats, delivering an ambient soundscape replete with infantilizing ASMR pet talk for lyrics. Entering the white-walled gallery, a fleece covered stair-step is furnished with sculptural assemblages—an oversized bottle of hairspray slathered in moldable plastic, a Harry Potter DVD encased in raw hide, a dog bone braided in rope... Configurations of these objects hang from the ceiling too so that the interior mimics a doggie gym (at the opening, Sarnelle walks around with her own 4-legged prince strapped to her chest in a sling). On the back wall hang a row of gloupy, marbled plastic USB drives. (The event's Facebook post informs that these are for sale, a limited edition containing an MP3 of Sarnelle's audio piece and an additional video.) Littering the floor are sheets of 8.5x11 copier paper printed with a dense block of text. The page is headed "Dog Dream" followed with a quote by North Korean foreign minister Ri Yong-ho, who responded to Trump's 2017 proclamation to destroy North Korea with this: "There is a saying that *marching goes on even when dogs bark*. If they are trying to shock us with the sound of a dog's bark they are clearly having a dog dream."

In Korean parlance, a dog dream is one that is scattered, that makes little sense.

The printed text is both a fever dream and a chilling torrent of reality. It is key to interpreting the larger chaos of our present political moment, one that feels hallucinatory at best, and to navigating Sarnelle's show as a whole. "The only time Rodrigo Duterte gets to eat is during a chopper or car rides in between events," the paper begins. We're in the chopper with him ("Rody"), grazing on tuna sandwiches from a

plastic container. We quench our thirst with a chilled carton of coconut water. The chopper transforms into a plane (Trump Force One) whose “cupboards are stacked with Vienna Fingers.” Effortlessly the textual landscape reforms itself over and over as the narrator leaks a trail of “factoids”: “The Netanyahus refer to bottles of pink champagne (Sara’s favorite) as “pinks”; “As a young student in Switzerland, Kim Jong Un wears Nike Air Jordans and spends hours making meticulous pencil drawings of Chicago Bulls superstar Michael Jordan”; “Putin must be well known in Russian Hockey circles for having Gordie Howe’s elbows, because everybody seems to give him a wide berth.” We’re told that Trump’s heraldic coat of arms (displaying three lions on a shield) was appropriated from a British aristocrat, but Trump scrubbed the Latin inscription “Integritas” (integrity) from the motif and replaced it with an imprint of his name. Dare we believe it? Seamlessly the text glides on: “Are you coming around the 2nd or before? If so, please can you bring a copy of *Harry Potter Deathly Hallows Part 2?*” writes Asthma Assad in one leaked email.” This slither of correspondence is replicated from a message purportedly sent by Mrs Asma Al-Assad to a friend amidst a backdrop of conflict and protest against her husband, Bashar Al-Assad. In the same slew of leaked emails (over 3000), exists this affirmation purportedly sent from Asma to Bashar: “If we are strong together, we will overcome this together... I love you.”¹

The text’s narrator is a global journalist filtering excerpts from across the contemporary media landscape. Assembled on the page it is difficult to accept them as truth. Our critical faculties are exhausted because the real looks and smells so fake. The morning of Sarnelle’s opening, NYC-based attorney David Buckel killed himself by lighting himself on fire in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park to call attention to environmental malfeasance. The dismal surreality of the present is so radically destabilizing that the very notion of “disruption” is hampered (and one must acknowledge that art’s potency is negligible compared to an act of self-immolation). In an accelerated cycle of hyper-presentation, where information is diluted and variously packaged across hundreds of platforms simultaneously, it feels increasingly difficult to locate a maneuverable path. Some days it can feel like wading, then drowning.

As I write this review on a bright Tuesday morning, James Comey is speaking on NPR. “President Trump, I don’t follow him on Twitter but I get to see his tweets tweeted, I don’t know how many, but some tweets this past couple of days [said] that I should be in jail. The president of the United States just said that a private citizen should be jailed. And I think the reaction of most of us was, ‘meh, that’s another one of those things.’” Comey takes a breath. “This is not normal. This is not OK.”

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9144453/Syria-From-iTunes-to-Harrods-to-Harry-Potter-secret-Assad-family-emails-revealed.html>