

## Household Management

*Nothing lovelier can be found*

*In Woman, than to study household good.*

- Milton

In my imaginary dinner party scenario of invited characters from history I would place the poet and polemicist John Milton next to the artist Sian Bonnell. She could tell him a thing or two about the 'loveliness' of the study of 'household good' but it might well be very different from what he had in mind - she has updated the rules of housework for the litigious and paranoid 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a sisterly twist and a gentle satirising humour.

Bonnell's work, however, is more complex than a 'simple' didactic feminist critique of the domestic; for she takes pride in her house, has a respect, a love even, of housework. She couldn't have done earlier work such as *Everyday Dada* unless the surfaces she stuck the food to were spotless. She gains satisfaction and comfort from both living and working in her house. Her gallery Trace is also her home and it's a welcoming place where you are offered tea and homemade cakes. The meditative ritual of sweeping the kitchen floor every morning is not a suppressive chore for Bonnell but a cleansing of mind as well as floor in order to start the day. This doesn't mean to say that she can also find housework to be frustrating and boring and it's these contradictory emotions that makes her work so much more accessible than earlier work by American feminists of the 1970s such as Martha Rosler, Judy Chigago and Judy Dater who trod similar ground albeit in a far more polemical way.

These artists needed to preach. They needed to push and challenge and disrupt the accepted norm. Rozler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) certainly still packs a punch. A suburban woman's lot in the 1970s was one of enormous frustration and lack of opportunity. To admit that you might actually enjoy domesticity would be seen as repressive betrayal to the feminist cause. It was a time to break out of the home, not enjoy the simple quotidian chores of the day. We live in different times now, and as crucial as their work was (and still is) these are not the only references for reading Bonnell's work and it is limiting to understand her work purely in that lineage. Her references and influences are much wider ranging and diverse, including Alexander Rodchenko, Anna and Bernhard Blume, Modernist costume designs seen on recent trips to Brno and Prague in the Czech Republic and particularly the posters of Bernard and Schmidt. Of course the works also tap into very current issues surrounding contemporary society in that way that photography and video always does.

The two pieces on show *Egg: Assessed* and *Bathroom: Assessed* sit comfortably with the photographic series *Risk Assessment* sharing the same tone and subject matter of keeping control of her domestic environment and her own safety. These works, Bonnell's first

performances,<sup>1</sup> were done not for the camera but for video, a new medium for Bonnell and her audience. It makes sense that her first attempt at 'acting' would be moving for that is how we instinctively think of a performance - be it through theatre, film and television. It is something that has a linear narrative. With photography we more readily think of the subject posing rather than performing although in reality there is very little difference. The 'real' person becomes a character if only for a second.

Perhaps one of the most famous 'characters' of the Victorian era was the young Isabella Mary Mayson, more commonly known as Mrs Beeton. How little we know about the real woman who died when she was only 28. In 1861 she suggested in her eponymous *Book of Household Management* that 'cleanliness, punctuality, order, and method' were the ideal characteristics for a housekeeper (or what we might today call the homemaker for society has changed and very few of us can afford a full time servant). "Without the first"...she claimed "no household can be said to be well managed. The second is equally all-important... Order, again, is indispensable; for by it we wish to be understood that "there should be a place for everything, and everything in its place." Method, too, is most necessary; for when the work is properly contrived, and each part arranged in regular succession, it will be done more quickly and more effectually. <sup>2</sup> These 'common sense' suggestions from the young Victorian don't sound too very different from an introduction to the contemporary government legislation that Bonnell is critiquing as she fries her egg and cleans the shower carefully protected from any impending danger that both acts might incur.

Today the home can be a hazardous place. Every year almost 4,000 people die in accidents in the home and 2.7 million are admitted at accident and emergency departments throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Bonnell is only too aware of this and in her most recent series of self portraits *Risk Assessment* she is not going to be one of the innocent victims – precautions have been taken. Here we see Bonnell in her home, doing the daily chores and 'deeper housework' such as unblocking drains and cleaning the windows reluctantly saved for bank holidays and the ever threatening 'Spring Clean'. Flippers protect her feet from the wet floors; a yellow mac from the water coming from a spurting blocked drain and a trip to the fridge becomes an exercise in stealth - a balaclava protecting her from the ever present threat of fridge burn. These performances for the camera poke fun at the constant rules and regulations governing how we act in spaces – both public and private for the safety of ourselves and others. How ridiculous and unreasonable these rules have become.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact her first video was done whilst on residency in Brno and was the inspiration for these two mentioned here. Being her first attempt at video it is not 'successful' as a finished body of work but is a crucial part of the artistic process. The videos featured here came conceptually before the photographic series *Risk Assessment* but were made afterwards due to logistics. Despite the chronological order of the creating I feel they are her first self portraits as they were conceived and planned before the photographic work.

<sup>2</sup> From Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, 1861, Chapter 2, Section 55 "The Housekeeper"

<sup>3</sup> Statistics supplied from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. (RoSPA)

If we look closely at the costume that Bonnell has chosen for the character she has created in *Risk Assessment* we see a dress. It is not the main subject of the work but it's certainly worth considering. The dress is important for it is the most obvious signifier of femininity – but like the work of Bonnell itself it gives out contradictory messages. On one hand its 'pretty' reminiscent of the constructed advertising tableaux's of the perfect 1950s family where the woman is the centre of the home, but on the other the green and white has connotations of camouflage, with its ability to make the subject disappear but also stand out when out of context. Clothing and more significantly fashion is often unfairly dismissed as something superficial and unimportant but here it is crucial. Bonnell's decision to choose this dress with its ability to stand out and blend in simultaneously, chimes directly with her motivation to make these self portraits. When interviewed she said she had reached an age when she saw that she was disappearing.

The character she creates the other new portrait series *Health and Safety* can be seen as a darker and more threatening side to the character in *Risk Assessment*. This set of portraits lack the lightness of touch we have become accustomed to in Bonnell's work and the humour here is deadpan and sardonic. They have an intimidating edge that comes across in the way that Bonnell is so obviously uncomfortable in front of the camera. They are not easy to look at and it seems that were not at all easy to make.

These are Bonnell's first series of photographic self portraits – and her discomfort is obvious. Coming in front of the camera forces her to relinquish control of the camera and change her usual working practice. She is ill at ease, posing with obvious trepidation. She is on one hand determined but also vulnerable. Added to this she is also in an environment that is alien to her; the monological studio is far removed from the comforts of her home where she is at her best. The black background and hushed atmosphere of the studio is not so very different from that of a theatre and in many ways the series can be read as an audition for the larger body of work *Risk Assessment*. Her tension, self consciousness, fears of failure and rejection are as palpable and as raw as any auditioning actor facing a panel of judges.

Again Bonnell wears the clichéd signifier of femininity – pink – but gone are any mixed messages about domesticity and femininity. The boiler suit and its obvious concealing of a feminine body is an aggressive act of defiance and appropriation of male working attire. She is a woman on the 'edge' morphing into a demented automaton; the very nemesis of the 'Domestic Goddess' personified by television 'angels' such as Nigella Lawson whose television persona oozes a clichéd and stereotypical view of female sexuality which is both intimidating and lamentable at the same time. The woman Bonnell presents here does not love her home; she does not care for the washing up or take any pleasure in a shining kitchen floor. She does not welcome you in but threatens the home and in turn its associations with safety and warmth. Bonnell has created a character which cuts to core of something quite primal.

Her frustration which is so borne out in this series can be seen with more humorous effect in *Kaput*, a crucial series of work which lured Bonnell out in front of the camera to perform and away from the anonymity of being the 'the author'. These works highlight her sculptural background and you could imagine her creations working just as successfully as objects as they do photographs. They remind me of the British sculptor Richard Wentworth's photographic series *Making Do and Getting By* where he finds on the street little human interventions which make life easier and make the everyday 'work'. A fork used to prop open a window for instance is just the right length and width to fit perfectly in the gap and allow a gentle breeze in.

Bonnell's scenarios however are not random acts of other humans intervention, nor really do they have obvious use or function. They are carefully constructed attempts to make things 'work' but the viewer is left asking why and what exactly. Many are doomed to fail where Wentworth's succeed and as such they tip into the ridiculous and absurd which is a characteristic of Bonnell's work to date. So where they might remind me of a 'Wentworth' they have deeper resonances with more conceptual traditions of contemporary artists such as Fischli and Weiss, Gabriel Orozco and Erwin Wurm all of whom encourage us to look at everyday objects in new and different ways by *creating* or *performing* 'sculpture' or 'still lives' rather than *finding* them as Wentworth does<sup>4</sup>. Bonnell's love of the absurd makes for succinct picture making which celebrates both the oblique and obscure and follows a strong tradition in European sculpture and photography which revels in shifts of scale and environment to give objects an unexpected visual charge.

The work on show here illustrates an important shift in Bonnell's work, and none more so than the portraits. They tap into something much more personal and autobiographical than one at first might expect and show her as an artist who has 'come of age' with vigour, intelligence and bravado. The fact that Bonnell used to work in the theatre is no coincidence; it just took time for her to be lured out from behind the scenes, take centre stage and enjoy the limelight. As the curtain comes down on her first performance I await the next act in anticipation...

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that in Wentworth's sculpture he creates absurd and obscure juxtapositions but has a far more 'purist' vision when dealing with photography. When recently interviewed he was genuinely shocked at the suggestion that he might move something to make a better picture. For his photography it is crucial that it is anchored to the real world - an essential counterbalance to his sculpture.