A detail of Mika Rottenberg’s film “Squeeze,” from “Bowls Balls Souls Holes.”

WALTHAM — Mika Rottenberg has two video installations at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University that will turn your stomach, twist your brain, and make your soul feel as if it has just fallen through a trapdoor.

Rottenberg, my new favorite artist, is a fan of kitchen infomercials, big-bodied extroverts, mechanical gadgets, and, as she put it in an Art21 documentary about her, “finding little solutions for things that are not necessarily a problem.” Except that, in her hands, they become one.
Her sumptuously colored, intensely claustrophobic films (the spaces inhabited by her outsize characters are so tight they function like costumes) are full of contraptions, sliding doors, chutes, shafts, pipes, pumps, and tunnels. They also feature obese and sweating bodies, along with body parts — lips, tongues, buttocks — that protrude sensuously but sickeningly through holes in walls.

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Rottenberg’s show, “Bowls Balls Souls Holes,” is one of several first-rate exhibits that recently opened at the Rose. The salvo is a shot in the arm for the institution, signaling another step up in ambition, and serving as a reminder that you will find things at the Rose you are unlikely to find anywhere else.

Rottenberg was born in Buenos Aires but moved to Israel as an infant. She attended art school there and in New York. Now in her late 30s, she has been working at full throttle for a decade or more. She made a splash at the 2008 Whitney Biennial with a video work called “Cheese,” and last year was the subject of a survey, “Squeeze,” at the Israel Museum.

Amazingly, this is her first solo show at a US museum. It includes “Squeeze,” a dazzling, 20-minute film about the making of an art object, which happens to be a vile-looking cube made from mashed together blush, latex, and iceberg lettuce. There is also a sculptural installation in two parts called “Tsss” (air conditioners drip water onto electric frying pans: tsss!) and a mesmerizing new work, “Bowls Balls Souls Holes,” that was commissioned and funded in part by the Rose.


Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham 781-736-3434.
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You might easily miss it: To enter the darkened screening room you must first bend low to walk into a funky little bedroom, then push a wall, which becomes your portal, as a friend of mine put it, “to bingo dreamtime.” The film, which is partially set in a bingo hall, is a small masterpiece of remorseless fantasy logic, a weird amalgam of Wallace and Gromit, Fischli and Weiss, Matthew Barney, Charlie Chaplin, and the S&P 500.

It almost feels wrong to talk about what Rottenberg films might mean, or what exactly it is they allegorize — they are too mischievous, too gleefully experimental, and too intent on blowing open your brain to function as vessels of verifiable meaning. And yet as internally coherent works of art, they are in no way leaky or loose: The acoustics, the colors, the rhythms, the fastidious framing of each scene are all as taut and streamlined as a Shaker box, and endowed with similar surface tension.

But it might be fair to say that Rottenberg’s films are elaborate fictions about how products, including art objects, are harvested, packaged, distributed, and consumed (yawn); or, more simply (eye rub), about how strange and disturbing is the process by which we extract value from nature and human labor. They suggest to me (wriggle in your seat) how our bodies dramatize, almost hysterically, the weight of their own needs and desires, and force that drama — almost literally squeezing it — into the systems of labor and production we laughably call “economics” (there’s nothing economical about it: it’s baroque; it’s a blow out!).

I can’t tell you, by way of example, what tremendous, futile labor went into that last paragraph which, to me, and probably to you, makes Rottenberg’s work sound duller than doing the dishes. But believe me, when you see her work, when you see what invention, what grossness, what beauty, and brilliance she puts into her fictions, you will think differently. Standing at the sink, brush in hand, you might find, as I did, your labor subjected to disturbing new imaginative pressures: spray, squeeze, suck, wipe, rinse, drain, repeat.

Chris Burden, another artist long interested in labor, mechanics, and spectacle – but in entirely different ways – is the subject of a second exhibition at the Rose. A gun freak and car lover from Los Angeles, Burden is famous for a performance in the early ’70s called “Shoot,” in which the artist, in an otherwise empty white cube gallery, had a friend shoot him in his upper left arm with a .22. (Did I mention remorseless fantasy logic? Performance art in the ’70s had a patent on it.)
On another occasion, Burden invited guests to the Palisades in Santa Monica overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Upon arrival, they saw a mounted telescope, set up by an assistant. Looking through it, they saw Burden in a kayak, far out at sea, “paddling,” according to the critic Peter Schjeldahl, “in a dazzle of light from the declining sun, a lone, tiny, laboring silhouette appearing and disappearing in the sparkle.”

A wonderful image to contemplate. But how did it feel for the next two hours? After that precise duration, the telescope was “whisked away and everybody went home.”

After a period of eclipse, Burden returned to prominence in the early ’80s. This time, and ever since, his art seemed taken up with the peculiar, pressurized euphoria of making things. He treated the logical intricacies of mechanical engineering as a kind of unchecked child’s game, toying with tremendous forces (gravity, massive horsepower) in a spirit of backyard, flare-eyed experiment, evoking forces similarly tremendous, and monstrously impervious, in society at large. His masterpiece is “Metropolis II,” a massive model city with speeding toy cars, owned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


The Rose show is a near-complete survey of his small-scale model bridges made from vintage or reproduced Meccano and Erector parts. It includes models of famous bridges, including London Bridge, as well as invented ones.

An austere, surprisingly dry show, it nonetheless has a natural appeal for kids and savants. For the rest of us, it’s counter-intuitively cool, and will likely seem even cooler in April, when a two-story Erector set skyscraper will be installed inside the museum; cooler still next fall, when a new Burden sculpture, commissioned by the Rose, will be installed on the lawn outside.

Downstairs at the Rose is a third show organized by curator-at-large Katy Siegel, the first in a series pairing different artists, in this case the acclaimed contemporary German painter and printmaker Charline von Heyl and Wols, a German artist who was born in 1913 and died in 1951. Named Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze at birth, he spent most of his life in France, and died of food poisoning in a Paris hotel, after checking himself out of a hospital against the advice of his doctors.
Both von Heyl, who works on a larger scale, and Wols, whose works here have a
diminutive frailty that somehow concentrates their charisma, tend toward abstraction.
But they deplore the idea of any kind of system or theory. Manufacturing little
miracles of color, texture, and line, both endow their works with an objectivity, an
almost aggressive aloofness, that is nonetheless charged with intimately familiar
yearnings and bafflements.

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