

Siân Stephens has been making art about the dairy industry for a number of years, often engaging with a strong degree of moral seriousness when exploring the subject. Sabina Rizos-Shaw's practice, on the other hand, is concerned deeply with fun. She draws upon the aesthetics of home craft, and seeks to engage viewers through artwork that demands physical participation. While the pair differ greatly in their art practices, they share similar feelings toward the agricultural industry's treatment of and attitudes towards cows. In *How Now?* the two artists bring their respective approaches together in a synergetic exploration of the sexualisation of dairy cows. Elements of satire and humour steer the exhibition away from the realm of PETA-esque telling-offs, allowing viewers to bring their own experiences and moral standpoints to the images and information shared.

The entry space features Rizos-Shaw's wearable udders and mounted cardboard cow head *Olivia*. There are five sets of udders, roughly the number of cows that could winter within the Engine Room's main space. Rizos-Shaw's mounted cow heads, stylised in a way that is almost cartoonish, are typical of her practice. They're fun and a little bit silly, but their ghostly white eyes seek to unsettle the viewer. Their heads hang on the walls like trophies, a particularly salient position in a country many would say is sustained by the meat and dairy industries, but the naïve portrayal reminds us that this is a pastiche. We're not *actually* celebrating the prowess of cattle slaughterers, or glorifying the industry on the whole. The idea of dairy being the lifeblood of the nation is subtly parodied, or at least that is my takeaway. At this point of our viewing, the exhibition is fun and accessible, both intellectually and emotionally. However, when the viewer passes through the red curtain into the main gallery space (ideally wearing a set of udders), they are then confronted with Stephens' paintings and video works, as well as *Clementine*, another mounted cow head by Rizos-Shaw.

Stephens' paintings take from photographs found in an agricultural guidebook which show various ailments in dairy cows as seen from behind. They are gratuitous even without the context of their creation, viewers stare straight into the animals' arses. The smooth surface of the oil paint on linen is evocative of the lushness and sensuality of classic nude paintings such as Titian's *Venus D'Urbino*. But the added understanding that these images show degrees of lameness that determine whether a cow should be treated or euthanised sheds light

on how the sexualisation of these animals is inextricably linked to their worth. We look at their arses and decide whether or not they should live.

The sexual themes of the exhibition reach their pinnacle with *SEXY COWS XXX*, taking footage of artificial insemination practices from YouTube and a sleazy soundtrack to create what is essentially a bovine porno. It's gross, it's uncomfortable, and it's hilarious. The soundtrack echoes throughout the space, and through the sexy red curtain into the foyer, reminiscent of old-school all-night adult movie theatres. While the psychological impacts of sexual violence and privacy violations on humans are becoming more and more researched and documented, we are largely clueless as to the effects of artificial insemination (and the relentless cycle of pregnancy and removal of the calves from their mothers) on cattle. The ethics aren't just blurry, they're practically invisible. Rather than presenting a heart-wrenching guilt trip (à la PETA), the artists present the reality of this process in a way that is funny, but minimally manipulated. Viewers are given the autonomy to make their own ethical judgement, or maybe just enjoy the art.

While the porny audio of *SEXY COWS XXX* oozes sexuality over the rest of the exhibition, *Move the animal into the restraining device* is accessed only via headphones. This requires a more intimate and engaged experience of the work, an instructional video outlining the slaughter process used in the agricultural industry. It also allows the viewer a level of agency over how their own level of engagement. The work is not thrust upon us, but offered in the form of headphones hung from the wall.

And perhaps this is what Rizos-Shaw and Stephens do best. They allow for varying levels of engagement, and create room for their audiences to bring their own ethical standpoints, knowledge, and emotions to the exhibition. There is no whopping telling off, no 'message' per-se, they are simply exploring and making visible the sexual nature of cattle farming. I bring to this exhibition my own experiences as someone who spent much of my childhood around dairy farms while living in semi-rural Taranaki, as an ex-vegan (with a very complex relationship with the cause), and perhaps most saliently, as a stripper. And while I also have the added perspective of an art history degree under my belt, the works do not require academic engagement with the works. While I am happy to intellectually pick at Rizos-Shaw

and Stephens' practises, the experience is no less engaging for those who haven't spent most of their adult life scratching their chin in the presence of art.

The link between my own role in the sex industry and my feelings toward dairy farming may seem precarious, but the exhibition's concerns with privacy, objectification, and consent are issues dear to my slutty little heart. In the year or so I have been dancing, I have been filmed without my consent three times (that I am aware of, I have no idea who has taken footage of my semi-nude or nude body without my knowledge). The first time this happened the club was quiet and the man made little to no effort to hide what he was doing, so I became aware quickly. I covered my bare breasts, jumped off the stage, and wrestled the man's phone from his hands, taking it to club security for the footage to be removed from his phone. It could have been so much worse, but it still felt horrifically violating. However, unlike the cows in Stephens' *SEXY COWS XXX*, I have the awareness necessary to understand the implications of being filmed in compromised situations, and the opposable thumbs needed to tear a video device from the perpetrator's hands.

No one can make anyone else care about something. While the exhibition finds its roots in the artists' concern with the sexualisation, objectification, and commodification of cows in the agricultural industry, viewers are not demanded to respond emotionally. We have all been exposed to guilt-tripping footage of the violence involved in getting meat and dairy on our plates to the point where we are practically numb to the limp bodies of bobby calves being thrown on trucks or of pigs screaming in their pens. In creating art (and humorous art at that) about these issues, the artists are able to foster an engagement with the artwork that is much harder to simply switch off from than black-and-white PETA adverts. Through *How Now?* Sabina Rizos-Shaw and Siân Stephens engage in the playoff between the moral and the apolitical, deftly balancing the objective and subjective to explore the very nature of how we communicate difficult information.

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