

# The Damage Done

"Multiple people fainted at the Serpentine," says Marianna Simnett, recalling the 2015 screening and choral adaptation of her film trilogy *The Udder/Blood/Blue Roses* at London's Serpentine Gallery. "It was on the refrain of a song. I was hanging upside down, with blood going to my head, going, don't stand up, don't stand up. And they just dropped."

That's not too surprising as Simnett's film work is rarely an easy watch, frequently leaning towards uncompromising, often clinical imagery. Udders, invasive procedures, varicose veins, sworn virgins and cockroach farms have shared space with issues of gender identity and bodily agency. That's not to suggest that her work seeks schlocky cheap thrills; the viscerality is tempered with black humour and a narrative structure informed by fable and folkloric storytelling. Characters join in choruses, deliver poetic curses, or even burst into song.

Comprising a film, installation and soundtrack, her latest work *Worst Gift* is thematically linked to a film she made last year called *The Needle And The Larynx*. For that, she worked with a Harley Street surgeon who injected Botox into her vocal cords to lower her voice. "I see these as companion pieces, mainly because it was such a lengthy research process," she explains. "I was looking at voice disorders and I was looking at gender, and what men do to lower their voices. I wanted to undergo that same procedure as a woman, and I was gearing myself together for invasive surgery. I knew the effect I wanted but not how I wanted to do it."

And when it transpired that the way to achieve this effect was with the Botox injection, Simnett lived with the results for three months, noting the difference in how people would respond to her modified, low, weakened voice. "I don't want to make work or fictions about something I haven't embodied myself in," she tells me. "I'm interested in temporary transformations of the body, things you could do willingly but come back from, like small lapses of consciousness or this strange warping or modulation of the voice, that out of choice I'm willing upon myself."

For all its body horror and brinksmanship, Simnett's work prioritises emotional truths over cheap thrills, and as such sits apart from an out-to-shock performance tradition. "Storytelling is more important to me than shocking," she declares. Although abstracted and presented as fables, her narratives are often rooted in real trauma, "like my grandfather's survival in the Holocaust, [because] he fainted at the same time he was shot at" (an incident alluded to in her 2012 film *Faint*). However, she concedes, "I'll pretty much not know where my own limits are when it comes to having to do something for the sake of a project, and that might be to my own detriment one day, who knows. I don't really have the boundaries some people might for cutting off. I'll just do it."

The limits and possibilities of being inside a body are central to the use of sound in Simnett's work. Bodily noises and medical machinery recur, blending with musical influences connected to her classical training and spell at musical theatre school as a teenager. The uneasy relationship of the body and the machine creates a curious accord; in 2016's *Faint With Light*, the guttural and frightening sound of Simnett hyperventilating and fainting is tempered with lights rising and falling like a graphic equalizer, suggesting a more sinister robotic control of unruly bodily forces. Simnett explains that she wants to "feel the limits of the body, and reach the extremities of that, through almost treating your body like a medium or a material: a risky substance or something to play with. Just like you would with film, or any other material."

To this end, her work offers an inversion of the way sound in art is often treated as an external force, attacking the passive body. Rather, the soundtracks for *The Needle And The Larynx* and *Worst Gift* both treat sound and the body as something deeply connected. "Maybe in my work the sound worms in more, rather than sits outside it," offers Simnett. "It worms into someone's anxiety. It comes in a very insidious way, which is like a slow disease. It might be almost viral, the way it could infect a body."

Simnett developed the musical soundtrack to *Worst Gift* in collaboration with composers Lucinda Chua and Leo Chadburn, with the ambitious sound design for the installation by Brendan Feeney. This is the fourth project Simnett and Chua have collaborated on. "We're developing this musical language together," she notes. "The process is really quite magical, because of the development of something over time."

Thematic concerns inevitably inform the shape of the soundtrack. For *Worst Gift*, she was keen to evoke "the flexibility of the voice, so you can't have percussive instruments, it has to be everything melting into each other all of the time". In addition to more conventional instrumentation, the reality of the medical procedures leaves an audible trace.

*The Needle And The Larynx* and *Worst Gift* both prominently feature audio from the machine that surgeons use to correspond with your vocal cords to make sure that they're injecting you in the right place – reading the body like a guitar tuner, as though the patient was the instrument. Simnett was thrilled to notice the machine had "this fluid liquid-y white noise kind of sound to it, because it's basically the machine reading wave forms that are in your body".

"The music had to feel like paralysis," she asserts. "I wanted it to feel like slowing down and stopping, the body stopping." □ Marianna Simnett's *Worst Gift* is at London's Matt's Gallery until 22 October

Tessa Norton

## Unofficial Channels

### Pop Not Slop

Nathan Jenkins, also known as the producer Bullion and founder of the London based DEEK label, has been quietly compiling a canon of skewed and charming pop oddities since 2015 under the banner Pop Not Slop – also the label's unofficial motto. Every so often, new entries to this ever growing playlist are listed via the DEEK Twitter feed. "For me, good pop music is imaginative, familiar and easily understood," Jenkins says. "When you dumb it all down to a mindless formula, that's slop. A lot of Pop Not Slop songs were never popular. The idea isn't to be obtuse; pop is just more abstract than its name suggests."

In practice, this means embracing an international mix of everyone from Godley & Creme and Marvin Gaye to Slapp Happy, Cleaners From Venus, Frigidaire Tango and Saáda Bonaire. Ryuichi Sakamoto and his Yellow Magic Orchestra associates crop up a lot, and Paul McCartney inspires particular affection. "He's a total cornball but he's made a huge amount of excellent music," argues Jenkins, citing McCartney's cover of "Tragedy" from the *Cold Cuts* compilation as a recent favourite.

Some contemporary artists make appearances – including Micachu & The Shapes, Ariel Pink and John Maus – but most of the playlist circles a late 1970s to early 80s sweet spot. The accompanying videos are a riot of ill-advised haircuts and some wonderfully lurid graphics that can be surprising – especially when, listened to as audio alone, the selections are both catchy and somehow timeless, transcending production tics.

"I've tried not to make it about any one time but a lot of wonderful pop was made in the 80s. The stars aligned between smart songwriting, bold production and big labels backing curveball pop types," Jenkins says. And what of today's pop? "It'd be foolish to write off so much music as bad, in any given time. It comes down to how dedicated you are to finding what you like."

At the time of writing, the list is up to entry 342 ("Here Come The People" by New Musik) and Jenkins has expanded Pop Not Slop into an occasional club night and regular radio show on NTS. DEEK is planning a compilation for release next year, once a few licensing deals are finalised. From number 214 in the series, Jenkins opened the list to guest curators. One of his favourites so far is "Feel The Steel" by Way Of The West, chosen by Bahamian Moor. "People sweat over their choices," Jenkins says, "I like how seriously they take it!" □ [deekrecordings.co.uk/pop-not-slop](http://deekrecordings.co.uk/pop-not-slop)  
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