

Melanie Jackson

Made in China



Essay by **Mark Harris**

Over the last few years Mel Jackson has been developing an aesthetic that allows her to reflect on the manner in which she is implicated in the condition of her subjects. The scrutiny into which her art practice is thereby placed serves as a metacritique of Western practices in a globalised economy. She tries out tactics of representation which remain provisional rather than definitive, treating the gallery as a stage for experimentation with art roles. Here is mimicry, documentation, myth fabrication, cultural voyeurism, performance, animation, political commentary, music, installation, craft and the cultivation of aesthetic delight. The irresolvable contradictions in this set of manoeuvres keeps her own complicity visible as part of the circulation of meanings around her art.

In recent work Jackson has let herself be drawn to received stories filtered by news reports or conversations. Kleist does the same in *The Marquise of O*, as if seeing how far a scrap of reportage could take him. Jackson starts then like the rest of us, forming an imperfect representation that underlines the fragmentation of our grasp of international events and our responsibilities to them. She is attracted to stories of work and migration, focusing on these new global narratives in whose typology she recognises the resurgence of earlier myth motifs, as if the stories most valuable for our future emerge out of contemporary crises.

This mythic structure is mapped over Marxist explanations of work in terms of alienation and liberation. One of Jackson's received stories, concerning escape from abusive labour conditions, translates into a fairytale of sanctuary earned through endurance and resourcefulness. It is the way that Jackson's treatment of this story oscillates between classic myth, critique of unregulated modernisation and imbrication in pervasive Western consumerism that gives the work its complexity.

Jackson's recent installations look at the impact of commodities on migrant labour markets today, where nothing of modernity's once incandescent future can be recognised. Workers from developing countries risk their lives to get to a job abroad that will earn a surplus that can be sent home. Her last installation at Matt's Gallery, *Some Things You Are Not Allowed to Send Around The World*, 2003, represented broadly constituted groups displaced through the labour market; Philippine amahs in Hong Kong and Moroccan agricultural workers in southern Spain, for example. The gallery was packed with disparate components including architectural models, video monitors and building debris, signifying desperate travel and improvised accommodation. This massing of materials served as critical reflection on the underside of another of modernity's features, the crowd. Where that earlier crowd of leisure, prosperity, urban promiscuity and social change was above all visible, this new migrant crowd is the opposite. Crossing borders under darkness, concealed within bulk commodity shipments, undocumented and inconspicuous, these displaced populations remain unseen.



Made in China takes us into the shadow crowd to reveal a web of exploitative relationships in which we are inadvertently implicated. With such a focused subject Jackson reduces the installation to essentials. A screen suspended in the middle of the gallery shows a different video projection on either side while a third video sequence, its soundtrack heard through headphones, can be seen on a monitor located off-centre. There is nothing else. Jackson intends this arrangement to provoke a train of thought that intertwines two Chinese stories with viewers' perspectives on the consequences of their own consumption. You must circulate around the screen to take in the whole piece, and this action reveals how the two projections,

separated as they are by a thin membrane, represent in a literal sense obverse parts of a shared condition.

In one of the projections a young Chinese woman gives a recital of an entire six-minute classical piece on the *erhu*, a traditional stringed instrument. From the sequence on the monitor we learn that this performer has moved from China to London to study with an English teacher. The qualification from the London school creates opportunities for her that equivalent Chinese teaching would not. Using animation, the reverse screen projection shows the story of a very different journey by another young Chinese woman as she leaves a rural province for the city to take up a job with a cosmetics manufacturer. She ends up producing eyelashes for Western markets.

Jackson's installation sets out the stories in an unforced manner leaving us to establish their links. For each of the two labours the discipline is extreme and repetitive. The musician is filmed over nine months of demanding rehearsals culminating in one bravura recital. The rural migrant finds she must meet the impossible quota of four-hundred eyelashes each month. If for one of the women labour displaces the promise of economic and social freedom with an absolute alienation, for the other labour is an external discipline that leads to an internal freedom and an absolute end to alienation. Where one is entirely apart from the product she makes, the other achieves unity with hers. Panning slowly across the scene, the camera reveals how this unity is mirrored in the rigorously planar architecture of performer and instrument. Sitting with crossed knees that project directly forwards, her upper body is rigidly vertical while her arms move in two horizontal planes. With the small *erhu* sound box resting in her lap and its long neck rising vertically, one of her arms moves the bow across her body while the other, held out at right angles, is bent back at the elbow to press down on the strings for chords and vibrato. The bow bisects her figure at the waist.

The labour of love which accomplishes the *erhu* recital is an antithesis to the monotonous and pressured labour through which the eyelashes are fabricated. Jackson came across this story in the *New York Times* which may have picked it up after its publication by the *South Asia Post*. Jackson notes that the story has a fairytale quality about it: 'ANSHAN, China - each eyelash was assembled from 464 inch-long strands of human hair, delicately placed in crisscross patterns on a strip of transparent glue. Completing a pair often took an hour. Using tweezers to lay hairs in an intricate pattern was exacting enough, but the boss also fussily threw away eyelashes that did not meet his standard. In the first month, that meant producing at least four hundred eyelashes.' The woman

desperately uses her knotted sheets to climb down from her window and escape. The fairytale components embellish the narrative at enough points to wonder about its authenticity - the dream of prosperity preceding the journey to the city; the deceitful employer; the demanding quotas (the quantitative hyperbole of fairy tales: in Rumpelstiltskin the king's rooms of straw that must be woven into gold become progressively larger); and finally the resourceful descent. Jackson's use of animation to tell the tale appropriately lets the story hover on the threshold of fiction.

According to Ernst Bloch, these narrative tropes of fairy tales reveal the origins of otherwise inarticulate utopian desires of feudal communities. The persistence of their popularity is due as much to an expression of impulses to freedom which contemporary readers instinctively vindicate. Cinderella's escape from servitude is the underdog's desire for an inversion of manual drudgery into luxury. Jack's trip up the beanstalk claims escape from poverty as reward for ingenuity and courage. We want the Chinese peasant's story to be true for the same reasons that we relish the fairy tale, but beneath our cheering is an insidious problem. If this tale with its happy ending is true then our heroine's escape absolves us from action or blame. The example of the eyelashes is telling, for their ephemerality and ostentatious seductiveness make them seem the most absurd of commodities. How many people do you know wearing those things? None? Your community isn't implicated then. But what about all the electrical gear or children's toys you consume? Most likely their production entails similar labour conditions.

Jackson's two stories also intersect through their common material of hair, used for the *erhu* strings as well as for producing eyelashes. Already with alluring properties, hair is here recycled into two emphatically seductive uses: eyelashes frame a look and music



entrances, but the producer is only integrated with the second outcome. With the *erhu* the strings of the bow rest between the two hairs that are played, as the footage of rehearsals at one point clearly shows. This contributes to its eerie shifts in pitch where the music suddenly veers into unpredictable tonalities. The ecstatic cowboy fiddlers from the 1940s like Frank Patterson with the African retentions of his emotional playing, come very close to the feelings of exhilaration and loss evoked by the *erhu* sound which ranges from bird-like cries, through reiterated variations on a three or four note cycle, to folk rhythms. But the prevalent mood could be described as immersion in melancholic introspection, suited to both the condition of repetitive labour and the discipline of solitary instrumentalism.

Jackson's installation recalls other two-sided projections. The overwhelming volume of *Hors - Champs*, Stan Douglas's 1992 installation, asserts the vitality of another anachronistic idiom, improvisational jazz, yet in doing so serves as its lament. Like Jackson's *erhu* player, these Paris-based musicians are expatriates. On the reverse screen is all the footage left over from the edited version; moving around you see what is missing from the other side. Simultaneity is more uncannily represented in Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story*, a 1974 16-mm film installation with simultaneous projections onto the front and back of a sheet of aluminium. Here is the same sequence of events filmed from two cameras originally facing each other across a room. You must walk around the screen to take in the opposite view and can never see both projections at once. The two unedited sequences show a young man and woman following Snow's on-camera instructions to place or remove items from the metal screen we are watching. The installation obliges us to a similar trajectory as the actors while we struggle to encompass, imaginatively and physically, the implications of what we are watching.



Like these, Jackson's installation uses the two-screen setup to stimulate somatic and conceptual engagement where simultaneity is experienced in relation to the qualities, results and materials of labour. The labour represented is also Jackson's own. With a digital stylus she has painstakingly animated the screened images and filmed the rehearsals across most of a year. Her labour of love is made explicit in the idiom of the installation whose work is analogous to that of her subjects. This is quite different from the process-based scripting of Snow's duration piece as it presents the results of an event set in motion. But under new capitalist practices what becomes of this art-labour as it corrects the devaluation of human work traditionally effected by commercial production methods? For some time employers have recognised artists' labour as the model they prefer for their workplaces. The huge investment of overtime out of sheer excitement about the work, the inventive task-solving and the unhindered creative thinking are now the envy of business.

The language defining work remains unstable. Los Angeles punk bands, celebrating their unemployability, were baffled by Chelsea's 1977 anthem *Right to Work*. Marx might have felt the same, as he was convinced that when work wasn't inhumanly alienating, and a form of indentured poverty, it only generated savings which would have been better spent. He loathed the way employers stigmatised dancing, drinking, and singing as wasteful, and recognised this as an attempt to suppress unalienated pleasures. Behind his esteem for instantaneous gratifications lay the hell of Victorian sweatshops and factories that for Marx were capitalism's most glaring offence. He was disgusted too with the widely shared delusion that industrialisation effected progress and with the economic propaganda that linked a better future to the proliferation of commodities.

If artistic labour practices can be so readily converted by industry then should artists be developing new irrecoverable working methods? I'm not convinced there are any. Better perhaps to work as Jackson does here in destabilising the definitions of art production by subjecting them to the perspectives of the continuing labour struggle and its new myths of resistance.

This is the ninth in the second series of Matt's Gallery booklets.

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