

Lou Lou Sainsbury: Earth is a Deadname

Gasworks, London, 17 July to 18 September

descending notes forms the centre of Lou Lou Sainsbury's Gasworks exhibition 'Earth is a Deadname'. The film focuses on a trio of performers – described as 'transing beings' in the exhibition text – who act out moments of extreme tenderness and pain with one another: mouths feel for mouths, limbs pummel upholstery, the triad wrestle and screech wordlessly in each other's faces.

We see the three creating a caring unit, placing their bodies at the service of each other, making themselves vessels: a soft surface to bounce safely against or to have one's anguish absorbed by. Yet the group is not as self-contained as it appears. They are connected to the outside world by various symbolic cues: the sound of a cymbal's bright crashes, a cascading scale played by an invisible piano. These chimes, both dissonant and harmonic, match the pain and relief that vibrates through the triad. They give rise to these feelings in the viewer's body too, and through analogy we see that there are external contexts and influences also acting on the group – elements that pierce and resonate their sensory terrain, becoming material for their dynamic. This takes literal shape in the cymbal, present not just as noise but as an object to be played with, to be dragged across the ground and used to direct light in an active shaping of the group's environment.

This cymbal, which also hangs in the gallery itself, triggers thoughts about how Sainsbury's art objects might operate. Scholar Jules Gleeson has shown how Karl Marx's use of the 'fetish' was twofold: defining objects that can both be interacted with through the senses and as by-products of social forces that can only be apprehended 'supra-sensually'. This type of fetish object abounds in 'Earth is a Deadname'. A white muslin curtain divides the two gallery spaces, recalling the pristine silks that shroud the dead wife's bedroom in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. The storyline in which the young Mrs de Winter is made to feel as if she is a feminine imposter presents a narrative that is ripe for a trans reading, but what Sainsbury brings out with this *Rebecca* reference is the way that women, both cis and trans, are fetish objects in a way, dependent upon and continually renewed by a cloud of things, ideas and other people.

In the sculpture *To the pain in the womb o womb womb womb fleshy womb*, a bedroom cabinet is strewn with empty HRT wrappers, gifts and souvenirs. In the other room hangs an unassuming portrait of the artist, a line of oestradiol gel looping across her arm. What does it mean to be dependent on something to be what you desire? Sainsbury treads the ambivalent feelings of this question carefully: the support of a substance or a friend is not without doubt or difficulty – as witnessed by *i keep you in my gut i keep you in my throat—are you hungry? i can feel you beating in me i can*, three steel plates bearing a 'cupcake cosmos' handmade with Kari Rosenfeld. These treats are viscerally sensual, all bubbly resin and fingerprinted plasticine, whilst also being absolutely inedible: several are iced with choice words such as 'mucus', 'burst' or 'pestilence'. In their alternative to pandemic baking, we get a sense of the pair indulging in the ugly feelings that can emerge even around pleasure.



Lou Lou Sainsbury, [Nov 30, 2021 at 6:12:27 PM]:
just a quick one. whats ya date of birth?
im putting u as a witness for my transform, 2022

As remnants of a devoted process, these cakes feel like relics. Saints are another kind of fetish, of the more atavistic, Freudian type. In 'Earth is a Deadname', sainthood is an analogy for transness. This isn't a very Catholic sainthood (although St Augustine does appear, described as 'a kind of pussy', in the poem *The Law of Desire is Fascist*), it is more a way of marking the desire for the celestial, the transcendent. From the cymbal, which dangles like a disembodied halo, to the stained-glass screen of jewelled circles, the iconography is abstract: the saint's body has been literally taken out of the picture, leaving only radiant light. Sainsbury has said that she wanted to make a 'good light' for transness. What Sainsbury is saying here is that it is not about our bodies but about our *context*. So often, trans people are mythologised through the lens of martyrdom. Even forgetting violent persecution, the cis gaze often fixates on surgery or hormones, searching for evidence of a mortification of the flesh which accompanies a spiritual transformation. This narrative is dangerous because it makes our death a necessary part of the storyline, turning it into a currency which can only sustain and feed others. The conditions for trans survival are not profitable and so they are not prioritised – except here. 'Earth is a Deadname' holds delicately an image of transness illuminated by these precise but fractured conditions: possibilities felt in a friend's body, in a film, in a feeling in your body.

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