

AN UNCOMFORTABLE FASCINATION: THE WORK OF ERICA EYRES

by Stacey Abramson

Curatorial essay accompanying the An Uncomfortable Fascination: The Work of Erica Eyres program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on July 4, 2008

I can't help but feel uneasy when I think about my total attraction to Erica Eyres' work. It's the same queasiness that I feel when I find myself wrapped up in the latest episode of *Intervention* or one of the many reality television series where someone is putting themselves in horribly embarrassing situations in the hope of love, fame or money.

I feel overwhelmed by what I see on the screen and the gaucheness of it all. Her work is uncomfortable, hilarious, sad and brilliant all at once. We want to laugh, and do, but feel sorry for the characters. We feel guilty about finding all of their misfortune humorous. But this is the reality of human emotions. She is able to shine the harshest light on the dark side of human nature with a strange face of humour. She makes us look at the strange and unsettling reality of these characteristics that we tend to push under the rug. Through each character that she plays in her works, Eyres lets us see that with a critical and brilliant eye. Her total control of the medium of both video and performance are what make her stand-out from so many artists working with the same ideas of humanity.

Since meeting Eyres in art school at the University of Manitoba back in 1998, I have been in awe of her work. Even though we started school at the same time, it was crystal clear that she had a talent that was light years beyond what many of us were doing or could hope to do. In the first couple of years of school, I recall her performing a deeply sad performance piece about a woman who wants her arms removed. In a similar fashion to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, she invited the viewers to cut away at her arms, which gave a harrowing and painful reaction by Eyres. Fellow classmates walked away from that performance tucked inside a small room in the sculpture building knowing that Eyres was a force to be reckoned with in the art community.

In her final year of art school, Eyres began producing the works that would give her quite the buzz in the local and national art, film and video communities. *Hank Williams Fan Club* and *The Hunter's Guide to Bereavement* are two such works that show the beginning of her exploration of the uncomfortable. In *Hank Williams Fan Club*, Eyres brings a Prairie drawl to this lonely and silly scene. We watch as Eyres, decked out in cowgirl gear, fidgets and fumbles, hugging her guitar and stuffed animal. She is aching for a connection. She longs for something to love her back. She epitomizes the feeling of every sad and lonesome, whiskey-teared country song there is. We connect with her, yet feel sorry for her. The dynamic of tension begins to emerge in her work.

Hunter's Guide is painful, dark and bloody. We watch as she is hiding from the death of a horse whose fate we are unsure of. Did she kill it? Or did she want to bring it back to life? She speaks poetically in French about lines between the living and dead, in metaphors that seem to evoke a nihilist sensibility. We continue traveling down the path of exploration of human behaviour.

There was a definite shift in work when Eyres moved to Glasgow to attend grad school in 2002. It could be because she tended to focus more on drawing and sculpture during this time. However, her work did not really start to morph into the spectacle of fame-driven awkwardness until 2006. She maintained a definite feeling of darkness as seen through *Missing Horse* from 2003. The mute sadness of the work brings the audience into her situation. Again, we feel connected with the emotional rawness of the works.

After receiving her master's degree from the Glasgow School of Art in 2004, the work in the preceding years began to shift to a new feeling of awkwardness – one that was drenched in a more familiar yet still uncomfortable setting. It's no wonder that over the past six years she has been developing a name for herself as one to watch on the European art scene. Her work has been picked up by the Rokeby Gallery in London, England, one of the most trend-setting galleries in the UK. She showed with *Bowieart* - an exhibition of 16 emerging European artists selected by David Bowie in 2005.

According to her page on the Rokeby Gallery website: *"Eyres often borrows from the aesthetic and artificiality of low budget television or film, but the addition of a psychological intricacy results in incongruous reactions in viewers, who express both repulsion and compassion towards the characters portrayed."* She moves into a mockumentary style of work that gives viewers a closer look into the minute details of the characters that make them so interesting.

Her abilities as a performer cannot be glossed over or forgotten when talking about her work. Donning false teeth, wigs and self-conscious costumes, she melts into the characters she portrays. But it is not only the make-up that makes her characters so engaging. We watch as she converses with herself in a series of voices and personalities that are obviously well thought-out and subsequently convincing. She constructs her characters with the detailed nature of a screenplay, while working with their ensuing aesthetic in a way that captures the spirit of performative video art.

She pushes viewers to the edge in all of these works. They end up feeling the same uneasiness and awkwardness that the characters do. Eyres maintains this tension in each of her later works through the empathy and aversion that the viewers have towards the characters.

It is in this state that she taps into the feeling that exists in contemporary media through the avenues of talk shows, child beauty pageants and reality television. She hones in on this dichotomy and brings it to an honest level through its numerous falsities.

The intricate and unfortunate realities of female beauty and uniqueness in corrupt situations and hands are explored through *Destiny Green* (2006) and *Baby Marleena* (2006). We can be ugly, vindictive, lonely and cruel beings and these two works take us to these places through two female leads with unfortunate, but coveted luck. *Destiny Green* takes cues from the worlds of beauty pageants and subsequent fascination with eternal youth and beauty through cosmetic procedures. This mockumentary of young Destiny brings her mother Kate, sister (aptly named Fate), talent agent (Linda, of Shooting Star Child Models), a poppy upbeat “friend” who worked the pageant circuit with her and a girl who identifies with Destiny for all the wrong reasons. Female power is juxtaposed with the changing face of child beauty. The mother metaphorically hushes Fate as she speaks the truth about the ridiculousness of her sister’s situation. We see the viciousness of human nature through avenues of apparent beauty.

Baby Marleena brings viewers into a world which by introductory descriptions sounds magical and enchanting: the life of a real life mermaid. Again, through the cast of characters we are confronted with being fascinated, saddened and empathetic for the situation that Baby Marleena is in, all the while being amused by the scripted feel of her mother Tamarra. When Sandy and her son emerge in the video as the hilarious and stereotypical Mid-Western Americans duped by the swindling claims of Tamarra, the film addresses those who fall for the claims of the equally gullible. The suckers, swindlers and victims of the work resonate with the feeling of being duped or used - the reality of human ugliness bores through.

The multiplicity of the metaphors within Eyres work becomes deeper with each work. Her two most recent works, *Commercials* and *Imaginary Girlfriend*, show how she delves full-force into melodrama and the actual infomercial feel that her works have begun to take. Both works begin to take Eyres into a more blown-up and extreme situations of fame mixed with awkward tension. Her characters have a more desperate nature that they try to pass off as truthful and natural. Although the situations are fantastical and ridiculous, the characters somehow become more and more relatable.

Eyres makes us face up to reality and stare down the rough and beaten path that it lays out for many people. She doesn’t go out of her way to gross us out (all of the time). She stays along a path of honest discomfort that allows us to feel an undeniable authenticity within her works that makes us somehow relate on one level or another with laughter that makes us uneasy. Whether it is our unsettling familiarity with the characters she plays or the feeling of wanting to reach out and guide them into a new reality, the work of Eyres brings us into a veracity that shakes us up in a crucial and bracing way.