



JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER

Josephine Meckseper's richly coded conceptual inquiries reveal the artist's trenchant and unflinching analysis of political aesthetics. Writer **Aimee Walleston** interrogates the art of the German-born, American-based artist, and discovers a continuous dialogue of opposing dogmas. Meckseper's *Las Meninas* (2013) has entered the NGV collection through the generous support of NGV Foundation Board member **Michael Tong** and **Emily Tong**.

The work of Josephine Meckseper is foregrounded in an examination of society's penchant for consuming itself through its own objects, images and ideas. Meckseper grew up in Germany but moved to the United States to attend graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), and currently resides in New York. As a European artist who is *in*, but not *of*, the United States, Meckseper utilises her doubled identity – possessing both inside knowledge and outside perspective – to create a discursive conceptual practice that ping-pongs from coolly detached social and cultural criticism to hotly invested political provocation. The artist employs a broad range of media in her practice, using painting, sculpture, print publishing and film to create individual works and installations hallmarked by an arch appropriation of the seductive surfaces of retail display. By creating sculptures that often read like a shopper's paradise – as seen through a one-way mirrored lens of commodity fetishism – Meckseper instructs her audience to step back and reconsider not the commodity itself, but the formal vessels of commerce (mirrored display

cases, glass vitrines) that underpin the idiom of commercial transaction.

For the NGV Triennial, Meckseper has created an installation that expands upon her previous formal and conceptual inquiries, in part by reckoning with the contrasting ideologies of Neoclassicism and modernism. Taking dynamic form in the space is *Las Meninas* (2013), a sculpture consisting of a tall glass vitrine containing several objects and images. Meckseper first began making her sculptural vitrines around the year 2000. These works often showcase meaning-laden objects and images that allude to ostensibly opposing dogmata. For example, a 2004 window display, titled *Selling out*, juxtaposed the collected documents of the left-wing revolutionary group the Angry Brigade with pantyhose packaging, menswear and cologne bottles. *Las Meninas* (2013) includes within it an oversized image appropriated from men's underwear packaging featuring a bare-chested male model with the same muscled physique found in classical Greek and Roman statuary, its price tag attached



PELLEA(S), 2017, film still
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with a wink. The model is Neoclassical, and his heroic pose and polished torso resemble the images of youthful vigour celebrated during the Third Reich – denoting an idea of the human form as locus for a politics of suppression and objectification. This image is countered with a sculptural replica of Constantin Brancusi's 1938 sculpture *Endless column*, one of three sculptures created by the artist to honour Romanian First World War soldiers who had defended the city of Târgu Jiu against the Central Powers.

Meckseper's sculpture creates a space where one can meditate upon the tendency for art and aesthetics to be adopted – and exploited – by regimes both commercial and political. Complementing this vitrine, and central to Meckseper's NGV Triennial installation, is a narrative film titled *PELLEA[S]*, 2016–17, which takes its core narrative and dialogue from the Flemish Symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's 1892 play *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Made into an opera in 1902 by Claude Debussy, the original narrative of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is a classic love triangle, where Mélisande marries Prince Golaud but falls in love with his brother, Pelléas. In Meckseper's re-imagining, gender roles

are inverted and subverted: Pellea[s] becomes a stand-in for Melisande, and Golaud[e] is reborn as a feminine character.

Like the world of traditional opera, the world of popular narrative film has not often expressed awareness of the normative gender expressions that dominate its characterisations and storylines. The term 'male gaze' originated in the 1975 essay by Laura Mulvey 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', although its origin – a feminist critique of popular film – is rarely cited. In her essay, Mulvey employed the lens of psychoanalysis to explore the idea that, 'Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order ... The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly'. While the male gaze remains the dominant perspective in popular film to this day, in *PELLEA[S]*, this gaze and these narrative modalities are probed and upended, bringing about new questions related to storytelling, gender and objectification. Of the film, Meckseper says:

PELLEA[S] speaks Melisande's lines,
and becomes a soft, fragile figure.
And Golaud[e] becomes more of an

authority figure, so the narrative of the film pushes against the traditional gender roles in opera, where women are usually portrayed as vulnerable. Traditional opera has very few empowered female characters. I'm interested in creating an alternative perspective, something that looks at opera and film – these overdetermined forms – from a completely different angle.

While this is the artist's first time delving into narrative film, she identifies an unexpected precursor to her work in the form of a serialised publication she created in the mid 1990s, *FAT* (1994–2000). Framed as a 'commercial' publication, *FAT* was designed in what Meckseper has described as a 'tabloid style', and was distributed internationally in retail stores. While playfully reproducing 'mass' cultural tastes, the publication also featured the writing and work of avant-garde artists and thinkers, such as Dara Birnbaum and Sylvère Lotringer. 'In some ways, this film is connected to *FAT*', says Meckseper. 'I am interested in taking mainstream media, like film and publishing, and making it into artwork.'



This conceptual approach is common in Meckseper's realm. Although *PELLEA[S]* derives its narrative and characters from a well-known historical work, critical discourse around the contemporary political climate in the United States is very much at its centre. The film opens with high-contrast black-and-white footage Meckseper shot during the inauguration of President Trump in early 2017. The artist focuses on the architecture of Washington D.C., revealing its odd mashup of Neoclassical 'wedding cake' architecture and statuary (including the iconic Jefferson Memorial) set against modernist structures, such as the Brutalist architecture of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. 'It's a conversation between modernism and the Neoclassical, played out through architecture', says Meckseper.

In her examination of these forms, the artist also makes symbolic reference to the study of sexuality and space: in the film, for example, the hyper-phallic Washington Monument is depicted opposing the circular edifices of the Hirshhorn Museum. By creating subtle comparisons that reveal a coded gender politic implicit in architectural forms, the artist calls to mind architecture historian Beatriz Colomina's seminal 1992 essay, 'The split wall: domestic voyeurism', wherein the author stated: 'Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject'. Colomina's point, in essence, is that there is no objectivity – or asexuality – in architecture, as the voice of its creators influences the people who reside in and around it.

Meckseper's film delves into the layers of overt and covert political machinations that define the United States' contemporary political climate, lingering on images of protest during the inauguration that recall an earlier video piece by the artist, *4.30.92*, 1992. In this work, Meckseper filmed five CalArts students on a rooftop in Los Angeles who were preparing to document a performance. The piece was unexpectedly reframed by the Rodney King protest. Says the artist, 'I created a 24-hour performance piece that was loosely based on Situationism. The Rodney King riots occurred while the performance was taking place, and they became a part of the piece – it was a minimal performance taken over by reality, becoming theatrical'. From an overhead point-of-view, the video traces police cars and billowing smoke, noting the aesthetics of traumatic disorder that emerged spontaneously in the face of gross injustice.

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Perhaps the most enticing element in *PELLEA[S]* is Meckseper's documentation of the 'grand pageant' of the inauguration proper, which features stark images of soldiers in formation marching down the National Mall. This footage – often filmed from an aerial perspective – bears resemblance to the Third Reich's propaganda films, making Meckseper's implied critique of the United States' new regime all the more damning. 'This election is the contemporary drama of our time', she says. 'I wanted to make work that recognised both the private space and the public space. And I wanted to create an original narrative, not just a reaction.'

The soundtrack that accompanies the footage is a rendition of German avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg's 1903 'symphonic poem' *Pelleas und Melisande*, which adds another layer of political meaning to the work (Schoenberg, who was Jewish, moved to the United States in 1934 after the Nazi party labelled his work 'degenerated music'). 'The footage in Washington D.C. looks timeless, but of course the event is already historicised. And opera itself exists as a mythical space – it's always in its own time and place, so the juxtaposition of the two starts to fictionalise reality', says Meckseper. By creating a film that intertwines history and the present-day, masculine and feminine, reaction and revolution, Meckseper reveals the many psychosocial complexities that underscore the one question that arguably defines the United States in 2017: How did we get here? In true Meckseper fashion, the artist allows the answer to remain permanently, and radically, in flux.

JOSEPHINE MECKSEPER'S WORK WILL BE PART OF THE NGV TRIENNIAL OPEN FROM 15 DECEMBER 2017 TO 15 APRIL 2018 AT NGV INTERNATIONAL.

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