Natalia Mali

*I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You*

Parco de via Magnaghi Garbatella, Rome, Italy 2007

“You’re just too good to be true/Can’t take my eyes off of you/You’d be like heaven to touch/I wanna hold you so much…” – Extract from Frankie Valli’s song “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You”

This project’s title is an ironic take on the issue of ‘love for money’. The performance targets the current and ongoing problem of human trafficking and prostitution, particularly the illegal smuggling of Eastern European women to various other parts of Europe. Natalia Mali investigates prostitution in Italy — women being shipped there and either forced into illegal work cleaning for wealthy households, or often into selling their bodies to make ends meet.

The performance piece *I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You* takes place in the confined space of a shipping container (seen on the right). Wearing a provocative dress, Natalia Mali gets down on her knees and cleans the floor of the container. She personifies the struggles of Eastern European women through the act of continuous cleaning. The performer has recreated the clichéd image of woman so often portrayed by the mass media. But the simplicity of her actions brings their symbolism into sharp focus. All that is present on stage is a woman, a bucket of water, and a cloth. The act of cleansing emphasizes the stereotypical role of women in contemporary society but also becomes a ritual, in itself, symbolizing the metaphoric cleansing of the dirt engraved in these women’s history. We see that we are dependent on the vital element of water — and on the vital element of womanhood, the essential source of life. The darkening of the water mirrors the dirty work that is the degradation of a woman forced into prostitution.

This act is accompanied by Frankie Valli’s song “I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You”. Natalia Mali worked with sound editors to create ten different versions of the same song, each changing the atmosphere of the performance by means of their emotional associations. The lyrics of the song highlight the irony in the performance piece. Frankie Valli tells the story of a woman who is “too good to be true”, a woman that is like “heaven to touch”. The words of the song both complement and clash with the performance, further emphasizing the fact that a woman is often diminished by being seen as a sexual object, beautiful and seductive in her nature.

In this enactment, the woman is portrayed as an immigrant, and a slave - a woman who has lost all pride and dignity and is in a state of desperation. She is seen as beautiful and sexy, but at the same time hardworking and capable of emotion. All these qualities cause the audience to question the values that are imposed on women by our contemporary society and the qualities attributed to women by mass media.
Screen stills from the performance *I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You*

Parco de via Maagnaghi Garbatella, Rome, Italy, 2007
I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You
Review by Lily Khoitiashvili
Berlin, January 2008

The Metaphysics of Physicality on Natalia Mali’s Body of Work

In our world of double moral standards it is impossible to tell difference between a housewife and a whore. When someone cleans a house, does she just do a job or perform to attract attention? What does a woman do so that a man cant “take his eyes off her”? These are the questions that dominate Natalia Mali’s recent performance, named for the famous song “I can’t take my eyes off you”.

According to her, human relationships in our post-industrial society are on display for sale in the same way as luxury goods. Mali’s women end up morally bankrupt and disoriented. This idea can be applied to any woman, but the artist primarily focuses on women from Eastern Europe in the post-Soviet era. These women are alienated in the highly rational male dominated world of the so-called “westernised” societies. In her works Mali shows how the craze for glamour necessarily becomes vulgar, as her images verge on the anti-aesthetic. Step by step the artist reveals the harsh truth about her women, self-disgusted, entrapped within the physicality of their bodies and within the confines of social inequalities…

- Lily Khositashvili. Berlin Jan 2008

Above: Photographs from the Gallery Lipoli & Lopez, Italy 2007
I Can't Take My Eyes Off You, 16' min, 2008

A DVD production of the video performance “I Can't Take My Eyes Off You” will bring into focus the troubling issues of an open Europe and in particular the problem of sex trafficking.

Accompanied by the corny hit “I Can’t Take My Eyes Off You”, Russian performance artist, Natalia Mali, suggestively dances around a shipping container – or a cage. Wearing a sexy ‘uniform’ she playfully squats and begins her cleaning job. Rubbing the floor until her knees bleed Mali elevates the chores of a cleaning lady into the realm of a sexual prelude. By the end the tacky song becomes the agonizing cry of a woman, fallen prey to the hands of criminal power.

The artist embodies the fate thousands of Eastern European women who in an act of desperation allow their bodies to be shipped, recycled and disposed of. The theme of the body as a site of political and social contest is central to Mali’s work.

As a native of Dagestan, a remote part of the Caucasus, and as a woman, she lives out the contradictory contexts that she creates for her protagonists.

Mali investigates the issues of race and identity bringing together her own experiences and those of her adopted homes - London and Berlin provide a multitude of examples.

The performance was part of the public art project “ConteinerArte” commissioned in the Parco di via Magnaghi Garbatella, Rome, in December 2007 and filmed by a German filmmaker, Heiner Muehlenbrock, with whom Mali often collaborates.

A high quality DVD accessible to a wider audience will enhance the video “I Cant take My Eyes Off You” and also successfully draw critical attention to the problems of Europe.

- Yulia Tikhonova
Can't Take My Eyes Off You Lyrics

by Frankie Valli

You’re just too good to be true
Can’t take my eyes off of you
You’d be like heaven to touch
I wanna hold you so much
At long last love has arrived
And I thank God I’m alive
You’re just too good to be true
Can’t take my eyes off of you

Pardon the way that I stare
There's nothing else to compare
The sight of you leaves me weak
There are no words left to speak
So if you feel like I feel
Please let me know that it's real
You're just too good to be true
Can’t take my eyes off of you

I love you baby and if it's quite all right
I need you baby to warm the lonely nights
I love you baby, trust in me when I say
Oh pretty baby, don't bring me down I pray
Oh pretty baby, now that I've found you stay
And let me love you baby, let me love you

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