

Karen Finley

THE AMERICAN CHESTNUT
JUMPSTART PERFORMANCE CO.

X-RATED POOH DRAWINGS

SALA DIAZ

SAN ANTONIO

by JOHN EWING

a substance less than realistic with more thickness than each follicle should carry.

At his best, Rodríguez-Díaz's brushwork is hardly visible. He also accesses the freedom of the canvas to transcend the duality of the mirror image, historically Rodríguez-Díaz's most prominent theme. And like meticulous writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, he realizes that believability is in the flow of the narrative, not exact duplication. While the gatekeepers of contemporary art may deny narrative and identity, Rodríguez-Díaz's work shows a keen awareness of the formalists' manipulation of shape and postmodern fragmentation of text. Each of the artist's milagro compositions abstracts parts of the body, reflecting a duality between the object and the viewer, the self and the other, the internal and external. The fact that Rodríguez-Díaz has chosen to show his work at BYMARCEL, a contemporary-fashion clothing shop, further indicates a contextual awareness of a current obsession—fashion and art. The irony is that while fashion may attempt to mask the truth, it usually accentuates it or betrays it because the self is inescapable. The eyes and heart in particular are vulnerable to the truth, and for the artist to have ignored these essential parts would have been irresponsible, the equivalent to denying identity. What Rodríguez-Díaz proposes is a balance between the carnal and spiritual. □



From *X-rated Pooh Drawings*
Photo: Courtesy of Sala Diaz

“Though she can be amusing,” says New York Times critic Mel Gussow, “Karen Finley is not essentially a comic. She is a polemicist.”¹ And as such, her controversial discussion of social abuses is compelled by issues of the day (e.g. prejudice, the neglect of people with AIDS, sexual politics and censorship). Staged in October as part of JumpStart Performance Co.’s New Access Series, *The American Chestnut* joins other Finley performance pieces in drawing portraits of oppression.

Branded an “obscene” trouble-maker by Senator Helms, Finley and fellow performance artists Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck became the focal point of a national debate over publicly funded art in 1990. The “N.E.A. Four” were censored and defamed when Congress withdrew National Endowment grants awarded them by peer juries. The grants have since been restored, but the imbroglio evolved into an artist-led suit now poised before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Taking much of the heat in 1990, Finley’s “notoriety led to canceled performances and lost income, abusive phone calls, hate mail and even death threats.”² Speaking at ArtPace, Finley said the attacks and subsequent suit have taken an emotional toll on her life and work. The artist finds it an ironic, albeit painful, reality that her portrayals of victimization have, in some ways, put her in the position of victim.

This personal backdrop to her new performance piece reveals itself in an overall tone of uncertainty. More than angry tirades, it is an ambivalence vis-à-vis the future, symbolized by the blighted American chestnut tree, which gives the piece both sharpness and empathy. Akin to psychotherapy, *The American Chestnut* works the naked terrain between rage and self-doubt. We can locate Finley somewhere between her indignant harangues at hegemonic superstructures and the nervous, giggling asides that poke fun at our

pretensions. This mixture of anger and doubt addresses a different set of American “chestnuts” — the shopworn myths of gender, childhood, and democracy.

If anger is evidence of the human will, a force applied to resistance, then doubt harbors the human spirit, both creative and vulnerable. It’s the struggle between will and spirit which Finley seeks to express and balance. *The American Chestnut*, like other Finley works, generates this interplay with a collection of stories, monologues and chants.

It is a big, complicated piece with set changes, costumes, and overlapping narratives. Performing the epic whole without intermission, Finley moves quickly between the stages two focal points. A semicircle enclosure made of dollhouses is where Finley keeps her “stuff”, her grab bag of props and costumes. She also uses a video camera to project dollhouse rooms, the audience, herself, and prerecorded tape onto the backstage wall. This enclosure is the childlike site of spirit, a place where the artist can dream, play, and hide from expectations and criticism.

Across the stage is a dressing table and mirror. It is everything opposite: scrutinizing, judgmental, combative, meticulous. At times, Finley sits at the table with her back to the audience. She talks on the telephone, updating “the reference desk” with arcane botanical and animal data, or recites snippets from a longer narrative. This is where the post-adolescent will speaks, the voice that tries to “get it right,” to survive despite the cost to creative spirit.

Reading a printed narrative in an airy, patrician accent, Finley gives voice to three obsessive-compulsives who are fanatical about gardening and bitterly critical of each other. At one point, they discuss the “tired, sagging, leathery face” of one of the characters. Cosmetic surgery is suggested, so that “when people look at you, instead of seeing their grandmother, they’ll merely think you look like their mother.”

There are other voices and stories. *Victor’s Secret*, performed in a black-lace teddy and stiletto heels, is a willful and hilarious send-up of straight male desire. Finley verbally assesses and appropriates top-drawer genitalia (Sean Connery’s, specifically) while moaning, grunting and

wagging her tongue like the most nimble porn star. Another vignette has her in a far corner fuming about “first lady” competitiveness. On behalf of Hillary Clinton, she wails with resentment, “You’re not loved like Rosalynn! You’re not mousy like Rosalynn!”

There is a voice which grieves the death of a lover: “I can’t bear to look at your chair, and I can’t bear to move it. But I’m going to have to, because I’m redecorating.” In another persona, Finley paces and sweeps the back of the stage, chanting a list from her 1996 publication, *Living it Up: Adventures in Hyperdomesticity*. “Buffing, dusting, polishing, waxing, vacuuming, baking, beating, blending,” segues into a pathetic tale of a little girl who cuts her own hair and is thus subjected to a cycle of blame and abuse at home and at school. The chant is intercut with the refrain, “I need a hiding place, a place I can hide my shame and disgrace.”

Like the American chestnut tree which narrowly survived a turn-of-the-century blight but can not bloom or multiply, the human will can survive trauma but does so often at the expense of spirit and the enthusiasm to create. Many of Finley’s performance strategies are about pinpointing that spirit within traumatic experiences and exercising it. Much of her humor comes packaged in an exaggerated indignation because that is exactly the level of energy lost to the traumatized and oppressed.

As with the wash basin and soap in the closing scene of *The American Chestnut*, Finley works repetitively with symbolic objects as well as nudity to locate and exercise the wounded aspects of the psyche. Drawing material from her previous performances, exhibitions and publications, Finley grafts new insights onto old pain. The video projections of previous work serve as an outside perspective to the performance. They are a surrogate therapist, synthesizing old breakthroughs with current dilemmas.

“Karen Finley does on stage what many of the bravest performers practice only as exercises in the relative safety and privacy of acting classes.”³ But, good theater and really good therapy have no 4th wall. The physical and emotional demands of her show keep Finley speeding around the stage in an unrehearsed fluster. Neither polished

nor predictable, the audience is asked to be patient as the chaos of her pacing coalesces into the poses and postures of the vignettes. *ArtForum*’s David Frankel calls this strategy “the avoidance of the mystification of mastery.”⁴ It is this raw self that either endears her to audiences or repels them.

This same quality makes her visual art snappy and fresh. Exhibited at Sala Diaz, Finley’s suite of *X-rated Pooh drawings* works the great divide between childlike innocence and the crass, commercial “profanity” of adult worldliness. It’s a relationship she explores as mother/artist. Taking Winnie the Pooh as a seemingly benign base text, Finley overlays the cuddly, comforting icons of childhood with willful adult projections.

Be it the right-wing paranoia that demonizes homosexuality or the exploitation of trauma by the self-help industry, Finley draws a relationship between childhood pleasures and adult fixations. According to 20th century painter, Francis Bacon, the function of the artist is to “deepen the mystery.” Karen Finley “shows what’s going on underneath the garden,”⁵ as Mary, her mother puts it.

In the end, none of this is art for art’s sake. It is art as catharsis. Finley is “getting the word out,” as she described herself at ArtPace. It is clearly her life’s work, getting the words out of her head. It is a process she honors deeply and is thoroughly amused by.

When things went awry opening night and Finley lost her train of thought, she turned off her vacuum cleaner and proclaimed blithely, “This isn’t a mistake, it’s an exploration of form. I’m deconstructing theater.” Such asides energize her performances and reveal decisive moments in the creative process. That hopefulness is also the empathetic gift she brings to voices which haven’t been heard. □

Notes:

¹Mel Gussow, *New York Times*, 8/1/90

²William Harris, *NY Times*, 6/5/94

³Marcelle Clements, *NY Times*, 7/22/90

⁴David Frankel, *ArtForum*, 12/97

⁵Mel Gussow, *NY Times*, 9/22/97