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# Nell Tenhaaf: Fit/Unfit, Robert Mclaughlin Gallery, Oshawa

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CORNELIA PARKER *Blue Shift, Cotton Nightgown Worn by Mia Farrow in Roman Polanski's 1968 Film Rosemary's Baby* 2001 Nightgown, light-box 170 x 86.5 x 47 cm COURTESY FIRTH STREET GALLERY, LONDON

museological presentations. Her sparse installation echoes the almost empty decor of upscale shops and at strategic points, angled walls are instrumental in creating a sense of surprise as viewers move round to discover the next find. On the ground floor of the museum, the large glass doors on the busy passage leading into the gallery

double as shop windows, allowing tantalizing glimpses of what is inside. Specially constructed spaces such as the tight catwalk area for Majida Khattari's *Serpent Dress* recreate a sense of the artist's performances and evoke her fashion-runway inspiration. Lamoureux's most striking intervention is her placement of E. V. Day's erotic, exploded, red stretch-fabric sculpture *Winged Victory* at the top of the stairs to the second-floor galleries, a gesture that invokes the iconic installation of the classical statue with the same name at the Louvre.

Unlike fashion or ethnographic museum displays of clothing, Lamoureux's selections emphasize garments as social and intersubjective phenomena, apparel as fetish objects and clothing as "an accessory necessary for the elaboration of a subject position." She closes her insightful catalogue essay by pointing out that the threads of interpretation she follows—clothes as place, memory, collectivity and alterity—can be interwoven or lost entirely in the spinning of other meanings. "Body Doubles" is not a knock-off but that rare event that wraps us in a better understanding of dress and desire, the richness of the fabric of contemporary art, the extraordinary experience an exhibition can be and the importance of looking beyond the obvious. REESA GREENBERG

## Nell Tenhaaf

◀◀ ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY, OSHAWA

Nell Tenhaaf's recent survey, "Fit/Unfit," at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, illustrates how her work tracks both the evolution of genetic engineering and our relationship to the concurrent progress of digital technologies. When Celera Genomics and the Human Genome Project announced a working draft of the genome in June of 2000, they realized that it would take some time to rearrange the parts list that they had identified into the actual sequence of the genome itself. Tenhaaf offers a counter-narrative to their unfinished story that also adds issues of gender and mythology. Her machines and images provide access to scientific constructs that often elude us. Over the past two decades she has undertaken a critique of science and its illusions of objectified knowledge.

In *In Vitro (the perfect wound)* (1991), the viewer encounters four fluorescent light-boxes, each one divided into six sections. Within each section is a beaker that apparently contains a pair of chromosomes. In the centre panels the chromosomes fade into the distance as images of splitting cells and Christ's wounded body overtake the enclosed space to remind us of the codependence between embodiment and genotype. The trope of medical illustration runs throughout Tenhaaf's work. The irony of this strategy was evident in *Species Life* (1989), where an unravelling double helix, inscribed with quotes by Luce Irigaray and Friedrich Nietzsche, appeared to be more at home in a science museum. On closer inspection, the discovery of the writings by a French feminist, who supported an excavation of the female imaginary, works to undermine the legitimacy of DNA as an inscriber of phenotype and reminds us that we are an emergent property, more than the sum of our parts.

Tenhaaf takes this critique of reproductive destiny further in *The solitary begets herself, keeping all eight cells* (1993). A long thin horizontal light-box, twice the length of the artist's height, contains an image of her lying prone. The nude body of the artist, overlaid with a dividing zygote, lab containers and an odd chimerical female figure, is suggestive of the parthenogenetic narrative of a virgin birth, which

is at once the basis for a religious belief system and also possibly a feminist ideal.

Her most recent work, *Swell* (2003), is an amorphous free-standing aluminum and Plexiglas construction with an interactive sound and LED display. As one walks towards the amoeba-like structure, an animated image of swelling and subsiding waves of water reveals itself. The closer one gets, the more responsive the piece becomes; the sound dies down and the bright white heart of the centre takes over from the wave. The illusion of empathy from this creature/machine parallels our relationship to domestic technology. Although our choices have essentially been predetermined, we believe that we can configure a computer to meet our needs, that it is somehow a mirror of our subjectivity. Tenhaaf has dealt with empathy and cyberspace in *UCBM (you could be me)* (1999), but in *Swell* she points more tangibly to the artificiality of communication with digital media, implying that an illusion of embodiment is the new carrot that keeps us engaged. CAROLINE LANGILL

NELL TENHAAF *UCBM (you could be me)* 1999  
Interactive video installation with motion sensors,  
touch interface, computer, video disc, sound  
111 x 192 x 50 cm

