BUILDING UP TO BRING IT DOWN

By Gean Moreno

The baroque, poor thing, like an ear of corn in a world of pervs, has suffered misuse. This is particularly true when it is applied, as it seems to be fashionable at the moment, to contemporary works of art. But the problem lies neither with the concept of the baroque, which is what it is, nor with the particular work it is applied to, which, again, is what it is. The problem lies in what the application glosses over, in the ignored nuances that disrupt the perfect alignment of concept and thing. I guess I've begun with a presumption that I hope isn't too untoward. Some folks would like to quickly catalogue Janaina Tschape's work under the rubric "Baroque" or the sexier "Ultraborque" (probably interchangeable terms, seeing as definitions change and don't change all that much, always chasing essentialism they claim to be eschewing) and leave it at that. But shoving Tschape's work into this category too hastily would demand that we turn a blind eye to what it really does: it builds up, in a way not dissimilar to baroque objects, but only in an effort to, un-baroquely, bring the whole house of cards down.

First things first: let's agree, for the sake of brevity, that the baroque is an aesthetic, or a way of being in the world, whose DNA compels it to gather and synthesize disparate elements into complicated systems. Its natural proclivity is toward arabesque and metaphor, rather than linearity and metonymy. Discourses are layered, incongruent visual styles are mixed, historical lines are intertwined, countless signifiers are gathered and left to mingle and meld, and incongruent realities—the world is a stage, night is a dream—are confounded.

All this happens in Tschape's work. Synthetic materials and natural settings, oneiric sequences and factual occurrences, painterly deployments of space and kinetic use of compositional elements—these are the antithetical lines twirl, in her work, into complicated braids of meaning and action, and ultimately coalesce into densely operatic

images. But the more Tschape's images swell with references and ornament, the less they seem to be about this very process of growing. In fact, they seem to be stripping down. This would be paradoxical only if the stripping down were actually physical—a reduction of ornament or a turn toward austere use of color. But Tschape chips away at the images and conventions that we've inherited as a culture by activating parody and teasing out ambiguity. The classical female body, so often draped in her videos and photographs with yards of flowing fabric and dozens of water-filled condoms that seem like sprouting appendages, grows comically deformed; it takes on Rabelaisean proportions and invites comparisons to Hans Bellmer's dolls and the marshmallowy Michelin tire man. Mythical Earth goddesses start looking like Divine. Distressed damsels morph into strange sea creatures with endless tendrils for tentacles. Tschape indisputably loves to pile on in a jubilantly exaggerated manner, but each new element is corrosive to what it is gleefully grafted onto, like pancake make-up on a sweet face. She knows that hyperbole is as much the domain of the drag show and the roadside attraction as it is that of the opera, and that at times it is at the fault line between opposites that one ought to set up camp.

Value is certainly redistributed when Tschape introduces a beautiful image of a maiden doing her sublime aquatic ballet, conjuring up timeless metaphors and narratives of the sea, and we then learn that the video was filmed in the Americana world of Weechi Wachi Springs, Florida.1 It's almost as if the most refined part of the culture meets its opposite—Homer in kitsch crackerland. Synthesized, these opposites become a strange and funny thing. References crisscross, clash and reformat each other. All of a sudden, our maiden, so Nijinsky-like in her grace when we first saw her, is sublime in the way that a lava lamp is sublime in the thick incense fog and Marlboro smoke of a trailer. So, Tschape's initial—archetypal, some may contend—image is now tweaked. The friction of opposites bumping and grinding as they fuse sets the sparks of ambiguity and parody in Tschape's work flying.

"The transvestite does not imitate woman," writes Cuban novelist Severo Sarduy. "For him, *a la limite*, there is no woman, he knows—and paradoxically he may be the only one to know this—that *she* is just appearance, that her world and the force of her fetish conceal a defect."2 (p.93) Transvestism, then, is simulacrum without original, the last link in a chain of appearances. As such, although an extravagant imitative drive may ostensibly be its most telling feature, what drag does, as it appropriates and supercedes the elements that designate "woman," is more consequential. It chisels away until it unearths the contingent nature of the codes and conventions that hold a monopoly on definitions of the feminine. Just as tranvestism shakes up calcified notions of gender, Tschape taxes and debunks esteemed cultural images and narratives. She chips away. Or, rather, to be more precise, she undoes, like the transvestite, by piling up. Instead of the quick blast of macho demo work, Tschape opts for a patient deconstruction that works by accumulating incompatible elements that slowly break each other down.

The comparison with drag sheds light on Tschape's work because both work through humorous reversals, always piling on and building up in a way that undoes existing codes and narratives until they morph into their own contradiction. Stifling certainties are quietly transformed into agents of something like indeterminacy, of fluidity and playfulness. In the process, essentialist narratives, fixed meanings, and the logic that may ascribe priority to one cultural tradition over another, are incessantly taxed. Taschpe's work huffs and puffs and blows down the house of cards that we call identity, which allows all sorts of simplistic us-and-them hierarchies and organizational schemes that serve those who establish them. Tschape's work constantly reminds us that cultures are always, in Edward Said's words, "made up of mixed, heterogeneous, and even contradictory discourses, never more themselves in a sense than when they are just not being themselves…"3

1, Weechi Wachi Springs is…

2. Sarduy, Severo, *Written on a Body* (Lumen Books: New York, 1989), 93.

3. Said, Edward W., *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2002), XV.