

Against All Odds

A. Laurie Palmer

The door rumbles loudly and slams shut to start. Where are we? Inside a curiously clean, brightly lit corridor lined with storage units. Clusters of eggs appear on the floor. A young white woman in bare feet moves slowly and carefully through the enclosed space, making no sound except when she picks up an egg and runs it along the corrugated metal of a storage locker, scraping calcium carbonate on metal, hard shell on hard shell. Then she bumps the egg along the vents in hiccups, smooth oval form meeting tiny, indented rectangles. Mostly, though, she moves in a measured, compressed silence, bending down to examine an egg, or passing one back and forth between her hands as if weighing it, or pressing one between her ear and a storage locker door, listening—or slipping one, and then two, and then three, into the side pocket of her dark dress, where they disappear. One egg she peels and eats. Which is a surprise because I assumed all the eggs were uncooked, or hollow. We watch her chew slowly and thoughtfully as if every sensation were an experiment. Through her movements and sensory inquiries, we are drawn into one long, slow question, seemingly about eggs, elaborated in multiple parts: how does this one sound? how does this one taste? how does this one feel between my toes? how heavy is this? Can this egg transmit information, can it tell me what's behind the door? These questions resist resolution; the long question of the video is bigger than the eggs, though it takes form through their strange and contradictory materiality.

The woman's movement along the corridor is intercut with other images: of eggshells revolving in a mechanical tumbler, loudly clattering until they stop abruptly, then reverse, and start clattering again; and of two disembodied hands, playing tug of war with an egg that is precariously balanced on a spoon (is it yours or is it mine? does time move forward and backward?)—or methodically dropping eggs into the tumbler, or catching broken shells, crushing them more, then letting go. These actions are shot in a nonspace of abstract blue, and enacted with brisk, regular, machinic movements as if a non-human purpose was driving them, as if the clearly human hands were doing the work of machines.

The woman's curiosity seems driven by something other than intention, in the way that autonomic processes in our body move us to perform actions we don't consciously request. She is not exactly sleep-walking, instead physically aware and alert, but moving in an enclosure where time's arrow is suspended, neither linear nor cumulative. When she reaches the end of the corridor the small mechanical tumbler is waiting for her. Its cannister is empty; she kneels and starts to fill it with eggs. But the eggshells have already been tumbled; they have already been crushed. We've already watched

them revolve and clatter, we've seen pieces of broken shell fall into a pile. Egg-time, like dream-time, is circular, repetitive, and aleatory (will it, or will it not hatch?). From a mineral perspective, eggshells decompose easily in the compost, their elemental parts reabsorbed by plants, and then by creatures, or slowly accreted as sedimentary rock, if not reconstituted quickly in bodies as eggs.

Gülşah's work has insisted over a long period of time on exploring a material agency that teeters on the border between life and not-life. Eggs in particular oscillate between being and thing. The shell is a hard but breathing, porous, enclosure temporarily protecting a form of matter not yet definitively alive—waiting, forming. The shell is a temporary house, outside another body, but an extension of that body, as well as its product. What's happening behind that door?

Elizabeth Povinelli and many others have questioned why the border between life and not-life is so tightly policed. Evidence of the porous reciprocity between living beings and the world of things is obvious everywhere, and the refusal of humans to acknowledge the material agency of our bodies in all their strangeness, as well as the liveliness of non-living things, is, in part, a refusal of the world's potential for rest and for renewal in ways that have not yet been allowed to be imagined. Capitalism's demand for productivity and a human exceptionalism built up in defense against mortality occlude and preclude recess, downtime, body time, dormancy, as well as illogic, contradiction, complexity, entanglement, and dream. What else might we find at work in the world if there was more space and time to be curious about exploring this elusive border?

I have a styrofoam egg sitting on my laser printer. It is big, goose or pelican size. I found it on the beach, next to a dead pelican. Here in coastal California, we were told the pelicans were dying because the ocean was warming and the fish were swimming deeper than the pelicans could dive. The pelicans, ancient birds, were eating whatever they could find that floats near the surface, which is mostly plastic trash. The pelicans were either starving, or they were choking on the plastic, and either way, arriving dead on the beach. I found the styrofoam egg around the time that Gülşah invited me to write for her show. It made me cry. But now, months later, the pelicans are inexplicably back. Flying again in low, long, slow, formations a foot or two above the waves, their prehistoric silhouettes exceedingly strange, huge heads and wings out of proportion with their skinny bodies, soaring, skimming, wavering and then dropping with a splash to capture a fish in their enormous expandable double chins. Fish are swimming again near the surface, though the ocean is still too warm, and the plastic trash accumulates.

Chanting is a rhythmic incantation, both humanly nuanced and mechanically repetitive. Mechanical movements and run-away processes, as well as drip, slippage, ooze, fire, and extravagant, sometimes poisonous colors have run throughout Gülşah's previous work. The only color in this video is the dark blue nail polish on the woman's fingers and toes, but it reverberates with the colors of the glazes in the ceramic works also present in the exhibition, and that of the shifting LED light registering the on and off of sleep cycles. The duration of heat-fired ceramic next to the erratics of sleep, and the suspension / gestation / transformation of eggs, stretches time in multiple directions simultaneously. Cause and effect are irrelevant in this expanse—there is no "in order to"—only the unpredictable swerve, the disruption, that produces life with a jolt, against all odds.