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Liz Magic Laser dissects political rhetoric at Various Small Fires



A still from Liz Magic Laser's "I Feel Your Pain," a 2011 Performa commission. (Yola Monakhov / From the artist and Various Small Fires)

"I Feel Your Pain," Liz Magic Laser's captivating 2011 performance piece, begins with a couple nibbling popcorn in a theater and sharing a shy kiss. "Hey," the man asks his flushed companion, "can I read you what I wrote in my journal last night? It's about you." The sweet, early moments of a courtship, clearly. But no. Actually the words are adapted from an interview Glenn Beck conducted with Sarah Palin in 2010, in which he muses, hopefully, about whether she is "the one."

What ensues over the next 80 minutes of Laser's work -- on video, in the New York artist's first L.A. show, at Various Small Fires -- is simultaneously absurd, disturbing, comical, creepy and revealing. It is the collage and montage work of Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield transposed into live theater, real bits from the media stream extracted, isolated, reconfigured and recontextualized to deliver something unreal, but telling. Laser pulled fragments of transcripts from television interviews with American politicians, modified them slightly and reenacted them using eight actors seated among audience members in a New York theater. (The piece was a 2011 Performa commission.) Their dialogue was filmed and projected on-screen as a live feed. Conventional boundaries between performers and audience, viewing experience and production process, dissolve as Laser dissects the role of intimacy in political discourse.

"I Feel Your Pain" contains 14 discrete scenes that trace the classic arc of a relationship, from dating through dissolution, only we're not talking lovers here but journalists seducing politicians and vice versa, and both vigorously working to endear themselves to



VARIOUS SMALL FIRES
812 N HIGHLAND AVE LOS ANGELES 90038
INFO@VSF.LA / 310.426.8040

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the public.

Laser's methods cross early 20th century Russian agitprop theater with the more recent viral video exploits of the late Andrew Breitbart. Her work is driven by fascination with how emotions are consciously, critically manipulated through framing, fragmentation, tone of voice and body language, how meaning is influenced and directed. In another piece on view, "The Digital Face," Laser has two dancers, one male and one female, perform State of the Union addresses by Bush (1990) and Obama (2012) -- silently, only through replicating their gestures. The distilled physicality of the performances is as compelling as it is disorienting.

In a third video, "Flight," Laser had six actors reenact staircase scenes from well-known films on the public staircase/viewing perch of the TKTS booth in Times Square. Again, the actors operate within the audience's space, and the scenes (from the famous Odessa Steps sequence in "Battleship Potemkin" to snippets from "The Wizard of Oz," "Titanic" and "Scream") all entail some sort of violence or tension, interrupting the site's quotidian balance with bursts of intensity. It's lighter in spirit than the other two pieces but similarly based on strategies of disruption.

"I Feel Your Pain" is the conceptual heavyweight here, and once seen is guaranteed to fester in the mind as election season unfolds. Watch for a possible restaging in L.A. this fall.

Various Small Fires, 1212-B Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice, (310) 426-8040, through June 16. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. www.vsf.la