

## Julia Heyward

### CCA Wattis

In the back room of the CCA Wattis, Julia Heyward’s wild voice in her performance and video, *This Is my Blue Period* (1977), ran loud over the absorbing refrain of her more poppy music video, *Dragging the Bottom* (sung with T-Venus, 1984). This strange synthesis was heard initially from the gallery’s main space, a suitably hypnotic prelude to the first survey exhibition, curated by Jamie Stevens, of an artist who mastered Vaudevillian theatre techniques, Mongolian throat singing, comedic ventriloquism and libidinal sound effects to deliver a particular kind of ‘writing that is closer to the way we think than the way we talk’.

Heyward is best known for her performances and videos, several of which were shown here. *This Is My Blue Period* and *Conscious Knocks Unconscious* (1979) were projected and screened on a monitor, respectively. Both demonstrated how the artist used her extraordinary vocal range and free-association narrative style to political effect. In *Conscious Knocks Unconscious*, Heyward’s talking head is often centrally positioned, exposed over appropriated reels of newsreaders and reportage, as well as interspersed with more staged shots, like a rotating Venus de Milo (‘Venus has lost her arms, Venus is lost armies, HELP, Look Ma! No Hands!’). The transitions and overlaps exaggerate her vocal distortions, religious and political rhetoric veering off course into more surrealist prose. Her voice moves swiftly from singing, to performing dialogues, to ventriloquizing, switching characters in an instant with the effect that, often, images can hardly keep up. Heyward raises issues such as water rights, squatters’ rights, artists’ rights, the objectification of women through art history, the Nixon scandal and the Rockefeller political and economic stronghold (the fact of David Rockefeller’s Chase Bank governorship is swiftly dissolved into a chorus line, ‘CHASE MAN, RUN MAN’). Her works give voice to how a politics of marginalization can pass through the body and be felt. And because this sensation is maddening, that’s precisely how the work often sounds.

### About this review

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By *Isobel Harbison*



Julia Heyward, *Untitled*, 1974, four silver gelatine prints

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A musician once signed to Columbia Records and a director of acclaimed music videos (including Talking Heads’ *Burning Down the House*, 1983), Heyward has not yet been fully acknowledged in terms of her artistic legacy. Her uninhibited vocal performances had enormous impact on the works of Ericka Beckman, Mike Kelley and Michael Smith, among many others. Beyond opening up that conversation, this exhibition also provided an introduction to many of Heyward’s lesser-known works. Hanging across the four walls were production stills, stage notes, scripts, collages, publicity materials and photographs. These were displayed in clusters, mainly unframed and pinned to the wall, with corners frayed and annotations left visible. The loose hanging style seemed to mimic the speed at which she worked; she was too busy making to think about posterity.

An untitled trio of silver gelatin prints from 1971 show women posing in a studio, a makeshift light-rig visible. The shots are double exposed as if to emphasize the duration of their performance. In each print, a French maid stands beside another woman in some state of undress. Gender roles are deconstructed within the work but there’s also a strong sense of play: these women are enjoying wrecking assumptions together. They’re reminiscent of early Cindy Sherman film stills but came six years before. *Untitled* (1974) comprises four silver gelatin prints, three of which show women reclining like Olympia, two dressed in seductive lingerie, one obstinate in flannel pyjamas. The trio are hung in line under a fourth image – of a previous installation shot in which the same three prints hang above three chairs. The four images work together self-reflectively, mischievously highlighting emblems of domestic servitude, art-historical postures of objectification and the airless machismo of conceptual art, a movement that Heyward was consciously working against by embracing emotive narratives and melodies.

Gems appeared everywhere, not least in the numerous components of *No Local Stops* (1984), a performance comprising 17 interconnected songs, which Heyward toured to several venues. This were reanimated here through photographs, collages, costumes, a music video and a coloured slideshow. ‘BORN HYP-NO-TIZED’ the chorus line ran, its lyrics collaged upon drawings of surreal, technology-inspired outfits. Heyward’s costume for the work dangles above us, a deconstructed leather bustier with jointed batons that lined her arms and legs, wired with red LED bulbs that must have flashed as her torso and limbs pulsed. The ensemble brings to mind Frances Stark’s zeal for dressing up

while dressing down the kinds of representation contemporary technology ‘provides’ its female subjects with. Stark would be one of many contemporary artists who might recognize interesting aspects of their work in Heyward’s remarkable *oeuvre*. This exhibition was, I hope, the first of many to show off her ‘blue period’ – bold, rambunctious and unapologetic.

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