

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The New York Times

DARA BIRNBAUM: 'Arabesque'

By Karen Rosenberg (August 11, 2011)

Marian Goodman Gallery
24 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Aug. 26

The veteran media artist Dara Birnbaum is back at Marian Goodman with a provocative mix of early and recent work (including her first foray into YouTube).

Ms. Birnbaum emerged in the late 1970s with videos that cleverly edited television programs to expose their promulgation of stereotypes; her best-known piece, "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman," isolates the famous spinning motion that transformed a secretary into a superhero. But lately she has been focused on the gender politics of more highbrow art forms like opera.

The title piece of her latest show at the gallery, "Arabesque," explores the intertwined careers and divergent legacies of the husband-and-wife Romantic composers Robert and Clara Schumann. Taking the form of a large, multichannel video installation, it samples clips from YouTube and stills from the maudlin 1947 biopic about the Schumanns, "Song of Love."

The YouTube material shows young female pianists performing compositions by both Schumanns: Robert's "Arabesque" (Op. 18), which he dedicated to his wife, and Clara's "Romanze 1" (Op. 11), for her husband. But the format of the installation is weighted three-to-one in favor of Robert, because Ms. Birnbaum found many interpretations of his piece on YouTube and only a single version of Clara's.

Her "Arabesque" tries to compensate for this imbalance with the film stills and brief flashes of text from Clara's diary. ("It is wonderful how genius works its way through all obstacles.") But the music issues its own corrective; Clara's "Romanze" emerges as the superior piece, at least in the impassioned performance by the Austrian pianist Iris Weingartner.

The most revelatory part of Ms. Birnbaum's installation, though, has little to do with gender. It's the suggestion that YouTube popularity can actually dilute artistic genius — or, as Ms. Birnbaum puts it in an artist statement, "The more the viewer is exposed to the masterwork (the 'Arabesque' masterpiece), the more it becomes neutralized by the diverse range of musicians attempting to reach for it."

The gallery is also showing some of her more nimble and combative work from the 1970s.

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Best is “Attack Piece,” a two-channel installation from 1975 that shows Ms. Birnbaum interacting with some of her male peers. As the Conceptual artist Dan Graham and others approach her with a video camera, paparazzi-style, she fights back with still photography — stalking her stalkers. The viewer, caught between facing screens, becomes a monkey in the middle.

Also transfixing is a series of single-channel videos of similar vintage, newly restored by Electronic Arts Intermix. Ms. Birnbaum’s isolated, repetitive movements are in lockstep with those in similar works by Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, but her presence — twitchy, wild-eyed, frizzy-haired — is bracingly original.

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