

Hour
01.25 to 01.31.2001

hour

ALIVE AND KICKING

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST COCO FUSCO BRINGS A PERFORMATIVE TASTE
OF THE MACABRE TO THE MFA

DAYNA MCLEOD

01.25 TO 01.31 2001

(arts)

visual

She kicks postcolonialist rhetoric in the teeth, blurs the boundaries of performance. You may remember Coco Fusco as the displayable, caged, female artifact who turned the museum world on its patronizing ear in the installation *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*. Maybe you saw her laid out during one of her wakes at Toronto's YYY Artist Outlet in *Better Yet When Dead*.

Perhaps you've read one of her books, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, or *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*. However you may know her, and especially if you don't, you're in luck: Coco Fusco is coming to town. Currently based in New York and packing a heavy CV jammed with writing credits, awards, grants and residencies, Coco Fusco has exhibited and curated programs, lectured and performed throughout the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Latin America. Brought to Montreal by The Studio Arts Visiting Artists program at Concordia University, Fusco will be presenting her work in the MFAs Maxwell-Cummings Auditorium on Feb. 1. And it's free.

CAGEY DEALINGS

In 1992, Coco Fusco began, with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, one of her most infamous collaborative projects that reassembled the parts that make up museum truth. *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* featured Fusco and Gómez-Peña locked in an iron cage and dressed up like the quintessential "other" of colonialist lore, modernized with high-tops, lap-tops and Coca-Cola products. Appearing as aboriginal inhabitants from an island off the Gulf of Mexico overlooked by Columbus in his discovery daze, this project exploded with international attention as audiences became divided between those who recognized its satirical commentary and those who didn't. Unknowing Washington, D.C., onlookers were stunned at the Smithsonian (the mother of all artifact and specimen-holding institutions); the same was true of those in Irvine California, London, Madrid and Minneapolis as Fusco and Gómez-Peña went about their daily routines as caged Amerindians.

Well-meaning museum patrons called the Humane Society to try to save the couple while loud-mouthed liberals screamed outrage and injustice at the museum's latest acquisition. Ironic smiles plastered the faces of smarmy intellectuals who felt included in a joke that they were never part of, not recog-



FUSCO PERFORMS *VOTOS (VOWS)*, INSPIRED BY THE PRACTICES OF LATIN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN MYSTICS IN THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES
photo Gonzalo Hernandez

nizing that they were as implicated in this spectacle as the artists themselves. This collaborative performance/installation reflected more than just Western prejudices and stereotypes; it scrambled people's perceptions of social categories and methods of categorization during an academic era that prided itself on postcolonial theory and politically correct mannerisms.

RIDGED WITH ECSTASY

Fusco premiered her latest solo performance piece at the third annual Performance Festival in Odense, Denmark, and has taken it to the Nexus Contemporary Art Center in Atlanta. *Votos (Vows)* was inspired by the poetry and corporeal practices of Spanish and Latin American Christian mystics in the 16th and 17th centuries, one of which, St Theresa de Avila, suffered from catalepsy. Catalepsy is a trance-like state in which the muscles of the body are more or less rigid – a sort of paralysis that can leave you mistaken for dead. "Basically I had been doing research about catalepsy for developing the character for the play," says a cool Fusco over the phone. "I found out during the course of doing that research that St Theresa de Avila, who was this mediaeval saint, had been a cataleptic and that her visions of being sexually overtaken by divine powers had occurred when she was in her seizure state," Fusco adds. "She wrote a lot of erotic poetry, but the eroticism was all veiled because it was all directed towards her love of Christ."

Fusco's research also uncovered the activities of cloistered women in Mexico whose daily routines were punctuated by their continuous performance of faith. "I started to do more research on the practices of women mystics in that

period and also the practices of women mystics in the early colonial period in Latin America and it was out of that research that came the performance."

DISAPPEARING ACT

Investigations into the macabre continue in Fusco's latest project. "It's really a play, it's not a performance-art piece," she says thoughtfully. *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* looks at the unexplained disappearance of women in U.S./Mexican border towns. "It has a script, it has three actresses, it's really not a performance. It's designed for stage with projections," she adds.

The idea for the script stems from a horrible piece of gossip about an artist who allegedly bought a female corpse, had sex with her and taped the whole thing in the name of art and art practice. Trying to respect Fusco's wishes not to glorify such a disgusting human being by giving him air time, yet morbidly curious about such horror, I ask if the story is true. She tells me that her research revealed that the "artist" did in fact have sex with a female corpse for a pimped price of \$80 (U.S.). Fusco further elaborates that the artist produced an audiotape for an exhibition and was essentially excommunicated from the arts community as a result.

The Incredible Disappearing Woman features three strong, female characters who come to the conclusion that one of them must take the place of the corpse, represented by a mannequin, and have sex with the artist when he comes to produce his masterpiece.

Keeping a breakneck pace performing, touring and writing, Fusco is also preparing a curatorial project. "It's a photography exhibition. It's going to open in 2002," she says enthusiastically. "It's called *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*

and it's about how ideas about race are communicated in American photography, of how photography was used to prove that racial distinctions were founded in some kind of visible reality."

Opening in December, 2002, at the International Center of Photography in New York, the exhibition will include a website, catalogue and symposium, and will range from photojournalism to photo-based installation. (-)

COCO FUSCO

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