

Carlo McCormick On the Art of Lydia Lunch

Certain emotions, by virtue of their extreme nature, seem more real than others, quantifiably truer, as if by dint of their psychological weight. Compared with the certainty of anger, our very notion of happiness is deemed elusive and immeasurable, something we expect and accept to be fleeting. Even the most rapturous of our positive feelings are somehow doubtable, as if, in a constant state, they would be more unendurable than suffering. For surely, infinite joy borders madness or stupidity, contentment becomes complacency, and eternal love is a panacea of delusion and need that will hardly suffice against the inevitable pain of loss and mortality. Lydia Lunch has invested something more than a third of a century now in a creative career that has not only consistently eschewed society's emotional ideals as a damnable consensual sham but gone further than that of almost any other artist of her time to plumb, probe and provoke the darkest regions of the psyche for the truths beyond the lies with which we comfort ourselves. That she has been able all this time to embrace the excesses of misery and misanthropy as a kind of ecstatic sublime—affording hope, dignity and even beauty to the most debased topography of despair—is a testament to the consequence of her craft and the righteousness of her vision.

To point out that Lydia has long borne a mighty burden of violent rage with a grace, good humor and satisfaction that have made her one of the happiest people I know, or that her highly personalized imprecations of rigorous nihilism may assault the folly of optimism while maintaining an abiding positivity, is almost beside the point. These are contradictions embedded in her impossibly complex character. Lydia Lunch has been a true personality in every sense of the word for even longer than I've known her, but as compelling a story as this may be, she is much more than a persona: she is an artist, a poet, a philosopher and a provocateur of the highest order. Because she has manifested a migratory practice, transitioning between music, spoken word, performance art, film, theater, writing and visual art with relative ease and epic restlessness, never abandoning a medium because of fatigue or failure but constantly redirecting her attentions to find the form best suited to the purpose at hand, Lunch is the consummate hyphenate artist. The commonality of all these incarnations is Lydia herself, and perhaps because hers is an overtly personal mode of expression, it is easy to think it's all about her. It is not, it's about the art, and even more damnably, it is about all of us, implicated and complicit in the horror she invokes. Stepping forward now as a visual artist with her show *So Real It Hurts*, Lunch reminds us that a heightened awareness of pain and reality has been a leitmotif throughout her oeuvre. She reworks this concern in pictorial terms with a narrative sense that's consistent with the kind of brutal storytelling we associate with her lyrics and spoken-word work. Looking at something with the contemplative gaze of art appreciation—instead of listening to the furious real-time pace of her performance work—changes the terms of engagement. Remarkably, within the passive politesse of a white-cube gallery space, there is no loss of that perilous aggression that so defines her seminal no-wave music (including her band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks and her solo triumph *Queen of Siam*) of the mesmeric transgressions of her public readings or of the spectacular cruelty of her theater collaborations with the late, great Emilio Cubeiro. Instead, the focus has shifted from that sanctioned dramatic space where a narrator relays her experience to a more visceral confrontation that demands the viewer to bear witness.

The scenarios Lunch invokes have always involved her audiences in dire situations that through their very urgency seem inescapable. Now, through the mediums of photography and installation, she creates a highly aesthetic zone of atrocity that is morally difficult to walk away from. Her art lies still, playing dead to haunt us all the more, titled with reminders of the fears we all live with (*You Are Not Safe in Your Own Home*) and the incessant perpetration of bloody conflict and societal strife (*The War Is Never Over*). Lunch, with her formative memories of her father's wretched sadism and the community-razing race riots that erupted in her hometown in upstate New York, continues to register the apocalyptic dimensions of the human condition in its most internalized form, but with a vigor that is externalized—a malediction against the paternalist politics and sexuality that prosecute their reign of victimization throughout the world and down the centuries. This is the frisson that animates her work: that hallucinatory disjunction between self and society, witness and participant. Dwelling in the realm of the senses, Lydia Lunch makes us feel her art, but she does so in a highly intellectualized way that forces us to think about it as well. She has told me that for her, "pleasure is the ultimate rebellion." Her work is a macabre dance with malevolence that moves us deeper into the pain toward that sweet spot in the heart of darkness where body and mind shudder with animal understanding of a truth that is proto-logical and beyond meaning.