

Jonathan VanDyke on Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay described *The Return* to me at the opening of *Coming After*, a group exhibition at The Power Plant, Toronto, in which we both took part. *The Return*, a sound piece installed on the outside of the building, was both highly charged and ephemeral, a veritable shout in the dark bracketing a crowded and cacophonous opening party. Curated by Jon Davies<sup>1</sup>, *Coming After* featured the work of queer-identified artists who were children and adolescents during the height of the AIDS epidemic, and central to its theme was the shadow presence of a generation of mentors/lovers/friends swallowed into the crisis and lingering like ghosts (an illustration of an 80's-era, Pac Man-esque ghost appears on the cover of the exhibition catalogue). That I missed Ramsay's installation as I hurried in from the cold December night felt like an echo of this ghosting.

While I stood to listen to the *The Return* a few days later, on a sunny winter afternoon, I watched a group of children ice skating at an outdoor rink adjacent to the museum's entrance. *The Return* utilizes a megaphone, its interior gilded, and is often mounted outdoors. Its megaphone is not the large, gaudy mouthpiece of a cheerleader or the power tool of a protester, but looks like the sort of emergency siren that is installed just out of sight, awaiting a singular, urgent performance. At the Power Plant it was mounted in a brick corner, and the source of the recording could not be seen. Leaning in to the megaphone, you had the piece to yourself as you turned your back to the surrounding world.

The gold interior of the megaphone offers a pronounced contrast to its plastic exterior. Gold signifies timelessness and adornment; simultaneously, the megaphone is a functional instrument that signifies the here and now. In Joseph Beuys' 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, gold leaf hangs from his face as he whispers to a rabbit. He mythologizes himself with this death mask, cradling the stiff animal like a shaman preparing a sacrifice. Nemerofsky's golden figure is a voice without a face. *The Return* alludes to the Sirens, a group of mythological females whose sounds were so compelling as to be deadly: distracted sailors crashed their ships onto the rocks. The gilded megaphone is also a lure. Its interior shaft is stamen-like, its exterior cone a modernist flower opening its sex onto the passing world.

*The Return* is not an olfactory lure, but an auditory one. Its sound, both jarring and pleasing, is the recording of a male singer imitating an emergency siren. Among the singers Nemerofsky has recorded is Beni Klocker, then a twelve-year old member of the Vienna Boys' Choir, whose siren call was broadcast in the public space of the Vienna Museum Quartier, and of counter tenor Geoffrey Williams. As with many of Nemerofsky's works, *The Return* is accompanied by a handwritten letter that

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<sup>1</sup> Davies is the Associate Curator at Oakville Galleries just outside of Toronto. *Coming After* appeared at The Power Plant from December 2011-February 2012.

documents the transaction between him and a potential performer, a drawing-document that is reproduced in the exhibition space and made available online. Here the accompanying letter notes his interest in the Siren's "role as one of many mythological women known for their problematic and dangerous voices, a kind of pressure point in discourses that project menace and uncontrol onto high-pitched voices." The Siren character is the auditory Medusa, both undeniable and repellent.

Several intertwinings are enacted by *The Return*. The juxtaposition of hand-leafed gold and industrial plastic reminded me of a visit I made to the post-modernist galleries of the Groninger Museum in Holland, designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au architects. A centuries-old clock was displayed in the stripped bare, cement interior of one gallery – the old on top of the modern, rather than the other way around. The displacement of electronic sound by a human voice is similarly disorienting. The siren was appropriated in several significant Futurist compositions at the beginning of the twentieth century, including George Antheil's *Ballet mecanique* and the *Symphony of Sirens* (1922) of Russian revolutionary composer Arseny Avraamov. But where those works put forward technologically generated sound as a call to action – bidding society forward by overthrowing convention – Nemerofsky's soprano offers a humanist urgency, a call that is carried body to body, not machine to crowd.<sup>2</sup>

Because the siren sound is so readily associated with imminent danger, the voicing of it by a human singer comes across as a cry for help, or, looked at another way, as a statement of resistance. The singer emits an ethereal, transcendent urgency, like a contemporary saint. Amongst the many depictions of music-makers in art history are Baroque depictions of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, who was said to have the capacity to hear angels. In Guido Reni's 1606 portrait of her at the Norton Simon Museum, she gazes upwards, towards the heavens, with her mouth open, breaking into song, while at her waist she strikes a bow to a violin. Her depiction might be described as beautiful, but she is not the heavily feminized figure seen in Baroque depictions of Judith of Holofernes or Daphne. Her head is covered with a turban-like scarf, and her youthful face is neat and androgynous. The overall composition is harmonious, but in the orderly setting of the museum, the literal silence of the painting is discomfiting. In this period where recorded sound is ubiquitous, to view a music maker performing silently feels oddly disjunctive. As I looked at the painting recently, I could hear the murmur of another visitor's audio tour.

In another gallery in the Norton Simon Museum, the viewer encounters Picasso's cubist painting *Woman with a Guitar*. In this 1913 depiction, the music player is fractured, like the machine sounds of *Ballet mecanique*, into bits. Gramophone recordings were just a few decades old when Picasso made the work, and were among those many technological advances (photography, moving image,

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<sup>2</sup> A new work by Ramsay, entitled *The Lovers*, uses a group of nine megaphones, six of them veiled, creating a small crowd of "singers".

combustion engines, to name the most obvious) that fractured and re-oriented sensory experience. The *Woman with a Guitar* is pieced, like the product of an assembly line, a humming machine. Nemerofsky's *The Return* presents a reversal of the Picasso painting: rather than rendering the human technological, he renders the technological human (the title suggests as much, as a "return" to another state). The fabricated, tinny sound of the emergency siren is repossessed by a boy.

Reni's St. Cecilia is cherubic, innocent. Her covered body renders harmless any notions of the female music maker as man-killer. Powerful female sexuality in music is still equated with danger – on the cover of Shakira's EP "She Wolf" (2009), for example, she appears inside of a cage. Reni's saint is a figure of concordance: there is no background "noise" with which to be distracted. Nemerofsky's recording of Klocker offers the innocence that we attribute to youth choirs, but its gender is troubled. In his letter, he notes the "daemonization of the high pitched male voice," a passage that reminded me of an experience of my early adolescence. My voice had already changed, but I was unaware of its apparent theatricality until a girl on my school bus asked me "why I still talk that way – your voice should be deeper."

Nemerofsky's most recent work, a video entitled *The Last Song*, further explores returning. A man of early middle age, his hair closely shorn, his jaw pronounced, wearing a gray shirt and matching gray necktie, stands in front of a gray folding screen that is adorned with a Charles Rennie MacKintosh-esque gilded pattern that appears like vertical shafts of wheat, or, seen another way, as stylized bars of sheet music that have yet to be filled in with notes. As the man begins singing an aria, the camera moves slowly towards his face.

The edge of the man's collar is gilded. This detail draws attention to his face and neck, which is veiny and deeply expressive. He reads as masculine, though his clothes are unrevealing. (He is gendered about as much as Reni's St. Cecilia.) His manner is intense and slightly theatrical, but not dramatic. His eyes take in his surroundings with a soft focus, not lingering on any particular thing, or on the camera, which moves around him in such a way that we understand it as a surrogate for ourselves. The singer's fingers tremble slightly, in a manner that feels unconscious, as if his hands are vibrating with sound. As in the Reni painting, the relationship between figure and background is totalizing; there is nothing else to distract us. There is a nakedness to the singer's hands: focusing in on them, I recognize the singer's absorption and a degree of tenderness that carries an erotic charge.

The performer sings a Baroque aria, *Tu M'Offendi* from the Vivaldi opera *La Verita in Cimiento*. About halfway through his performance, and at that moment at which the camera comes closest to his face, the performer's voice begins to "crack," and he lets out higher notes. This "cracking" ultimately makes a full change, such that the singer has a new voice, that of a boy. In the change there are a few seconds of discomfort and self-consciousness as he brings his hand to his neck, but he continues to sing, a shadow of relief crossing his face when he steadies into a boyish range. As with *The*

*Return*, the instrument (there, a megaphone, here, a man) does not line up with the sound it emits. If this is the singer's *Last Song*, as the title suggests, we understand this as an inversion of the usual progress of a changed voice: whereas the boy singer whose voice deepens into that of the cisgendered male is no longer fit for the role of the angelic, pre-sexualized music maker, here it is the grown man, a life of experiences etched in his hands and neck, who becomes de-sexualized. As a title, "The Last Song" comes close to that best known of "lasts," the last supper, in which Christ, who will never age into middle life, addresses his retinue of male companions, instructing them upon how they might partake of, and pass on, his body and blood through the transubstantiation of wine and bread.

Is the performer of *The Last Song* host to a younger version of himself, or is he a vessel of transference, bringing forth a ghost, a blood brother, a saint? The man sings in Italian that (translated into English): "You insult me but do not make my unchanging, gentle brotherly love any weaker or less loving." The subject of this passage is multiple: it encompasses both the listener and the emergent youth. Whether this emergence is also an *emergency*, as implied by the siren call of *The Return*, is not clear. As the song ends, the camera veers away from the singer, resting upon the now disembodied facade of the gilded screen.

In the gay male community, a history of cross-generational friendship, fellowship, and sexual relations is deeply embedded. In Plato's *Symposium*, the love between an older and younger man is celebrated, although there is the implication that the younger man is the "feminine" recipient or receptacle for the older man's affections. In Europe, the sexual recipient in homosexual relations is described as "passive," or *passif*. The word carries a tinge of the "passivity" that historically was placed upon women, though by contemporary terms, this sense of power dynamics amongst gay men, at least in my experience in the West, is far more playful, if not anachronistic. *The Last Song* carries with it some of this history, inverting the role of the "passive" youth such that he wills himself out of the mouth of a grown man. The youth edges forward, the grown man, back.

The scholar Heather Love describes the role of looking backward in the queer community: "Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, in stubborn attachment to lost objects." For Love, this unearthing, this looking backwards, is a necessity. For Nemerofsky and me, our earliest identification as men who desired men was at the peak of crisis, such that our youth took on the taint of emergency. As a boy I read the panicked articles about the AIDS crisis in *Newsweek*, and announced to my parents that I had AIDS. Even though I hadn't engaged in any sexual activity at that point, or made a public announcement of my orientation, I saw my future mirrored in men who were disappearing. Identification equaled transmission. Ramsay's work *returns* us to this moment of identification. The ghost of his work is the boy, not the lost man. By this reading, the performer in *The Last Song* is a counter hero who brings back the boy

on our behalf. He transmits neither virus nor status, but finds himself transformed by a youthful call to arms, ringed by a queer halo.

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