

Tania Bruguera at LiebmanMagnan

For New Yorkers who have not caught Tania Bruguera's work abroad, this exhibition offered a first opportunity to view an installation by this much-discussed young Cuban artist. The work was conceived as a response to the poem "La Isla en Peso" (Island Burden) by her countryman Virgilio Pinera. The poem is a long fragmentary account of a day in the life of 1940s Cuba. It is drenched in metaphors of eroticism and fecundity, though these are mixed with a sense of anguish and alienation. The language and imagery deliberately appeal to all the senses: Pinera evokes the smell of ripe fruit and floral perfume, the hypnotic rhythm of dancing bodies, the lap of waves, the fury of cold rain, the sweet taste of tropical fruit as it bursts in the mouth.

The installation, meanwhile, deliberately refrained from such sensuality. In fact, aside from the unsettling animal cries which greeted visitors as they proceeded down the dark corridor that led to the main part of the installation, the work seemed an exercise in sensory deprivation. The corridor opened into a room lit only by the glow from eight video monitors. These displayed images of a woman's face enacting various rituals of self-restraint/punishment. In one video she hoisted her head by pulling her hair; in another her fingers pulled her lips apart to create a grotesque grimace; in another her hands covered her face. The gestures were slowed to a glacial pace, and they occasionally were interrupted by brief snatches of Pinera's poem. The camera's tight focus on the face, the dark ground and the absence of color eliminated any sense of place. By withholding sensory stimulus, Bruguera (who is the actor in the videos) created a

powerful sense of oppression, suffocation and entrapment.

Bruguera is a performance artist who has cited such artists as Ana Mendieta and Marina Abramović as sources of inspiration. She uses bodies as instruments to explore social, political and religious restraint. In the most recent Havana Bienal, she exhibited a work which combined old newsreel footage of Fidel Castro with a performance by naked men enacting repetitive movements in a former military prison. The piece was closed down after one day.

The juxtaposition of the sensual language of Pinera's poem and the visual austerity of the installation underscored the notion of the body as a political site. In Bruguera's world, concepts like freedom, liberty and self-determination are not abstract ideals, but achievements that write their effects on our physical forms.

—Eleanor Heartney



Tania Bruguera: Detail of *La Isla en Peso* (Island Burden), 2001, DVD, dimensions variable; at LiebmanMagnan.