

# Photofile Magazine

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Bernadette Keys  
*Odalisque*  
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Bernadette Keys' installation *Odalisque* is striking for its tension. The viewer enters the clean minimal space and is drawn towards the pristine white bed. Flanked by white walls, the bed is backlit by diffuse white light coming through a sheet-like curtain, making it centre stage. A video of a pregnant woman wearing a bikini, floating in a swimming pool is projected onto the bed's surface, which essentially becomes a screen. Atonal piano notes emanating from two white plinths accompany the spectral images, a mesmerising play of morphing abstractions and figurations.

By using the title *Odalisque* (a concubine or woman slave), Keys references earlier *Odalisques*, notably Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* and Matisse's series of *Odalisques*. Keys too is making a commentary on femininity, taking Ingres' and Matisse's (and later Rauschenberg's) interrogative critiques and positing them squarely in the here and now.

Keys reconfigures the concubine as a two-dimensional screen image, deconstructing literally and metaphorically on the bed's surface. Although the floating female figure is suggestive of the screen diva, the plain woman looking blankly up into space quickly undermines this notion. Rather than resigned, she appears calm and in the moment. And although she is floating, her heavy breasts and stomach seem to draw her down, earthing her. She dissipates into ripples, pools of white light drift on the blue. The reflections within reflections resolve back to the woman, now a face with her eyes downcast, not in submission but

admission, perhaps of her own beauty. Finally, the image morphs into a forensic close-up of her eye – the *window to the soul*. The pupil then dissolves into an image of her head surfacing from the pool in an act of rebirth. So the loop continues to the evocative piano drone.

The bed is the place where people sleep, dream, copulate, argue and hide away – it is a place of enticement and intimacy. However, the seduction in Keys' work lies in the perfection and apparent beauty of the space; the origami like bed folds, the muted whiteness, the simple but highly choreographed piano notes. It is too perfect. The viewer looks for ruffles on the bed's surface, barely resisting the urge to give it an extra tuck for good measure, they listen for discords in the music, too conscious perhaps of its harmony; the more convinced of the perfection, the more unsettling the conviction.

A decade ago, artist Tracey Emin's bed and all its paraphernalia (*My Bed*) made headline news for winning the Turner Prize. Jumped on, laughed at, and generally hated, *My Bed* shocked. In his 2008 autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, the late British author JG Ballard suggested that Emin's show was a psychological test disguised as art, like his own 1970 'art' show of crashed cars. 'I suspect it's no longer possible to stir or outrage spectators by aesthetic means alone, as did the impressionists and cubists. A psychological challenge is needed that threatens one of our dearer delusions... [death].'<sup>1</sup> It is Ballard's ultimate vision of dystopia – sex merging with death, and its paradoxes – which underpins Keys' work.

*Odalisque* plays on paradox – the reconfigured odalisque as reflective earth mother is a two-dimensional digital image. The image itself is both fluid and grounded, but the theatre highly choreographed, suggesting containment and control. As with the Japanese tea garden any lapse in its orchestration is potentially fatal as the threat of nature, wild and uncontrolled, is constant. In *Odalisque* nature is subverted by technology; a ruffle in the bed threatens to disfigure the image, the hallowed space readily becomes a hospital space, what is beautiful becomes clinical, what is intimate becomes remote.

Ultimately, Keys' work confounds the viewer, it is an uncomfortable seduction, probing the way technology has come to mediate relationships and ideas of femininity. In some ways, her installation embodies Ballard's idea of the art show as psychological experiment – her sensational perfection evoking gut reactions, the spectator captivated and captive, finally at one with the *Odalisque*.

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## Notes

- 1 JG Ballard, *Miracles of Life: An Autobiography*, Harper Perennial, 2008, page 240.