

Agency and Action

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BY JUSTINE LUDWIG - 2018

Menstruation, experienced by roughly half of the world's population, remains for many a subject of taboo. A long-standing tradition in Japan dictates that women cannot be sushi chefs because their sense of taste is thrown off by menstruation. In parts of Nepal women are confined to a chhaudpadi shed during their time of the month, banned from taking part in household duties. The United States's current sitting president once remarked during a presidential debate that former Fox News host Megyn Kelly had "blood coming out of her wherever," as a way of discrediting her line of questioning. For a process that occupies 3,000 days of the average woman's lifetime, menstruation occupies a fraught and often directly contradictory position in society. It signifies a woman's potential for bearing life, yet across many cultures is viewed as impure.

Artist Yapci Ramos directly confronts the role of menstruation in her new video installation Red-Hot. Writing in her own menstrual blood, Ramos evokes blood magic and horror while also celebrating her own body and decrying taboos. Influenced by travels in Africa and Cuba, Ramos speaks to the shared experience of women. The 18-channel video work evokes 1970s feminist art in its overt presentation of the female body. The spirit of Carolee Schneeman particularly manifests in this work.

Schneeman used bodies as paintbrushes and famously read from a scroll that she pulled from her vagina in the iconic performance *Interior Scroll* (1975). Within her work, Schneeman asked, "could a nude women artist be both an image and an image maker?"—a question particularly germane to Ramos's work as she presents herself in the nude to paint in her own blood. Ramos pulls from her own womb the paint she uses to inscribe upon the walls of her bathroom, literally reaching within herself to create the work.

Red-Hot is marked by Ramos's unapologetic and unwavering sexuality. Subjects such as gender, the body, and identity are central to the artist's oeuvre. She

has explored sexuality throughout her practice, both her own and the sexuality of others. In 2008's *Hotel*, Ramos presented nude portraits of individuals whom she found attractive. In her 2017 video *I Don't Mind*, the artist stares decisively into the camera with an expression that is sears into the viewer. Ramos's gaze suggests the ever-present male gaze in society. While confronted by the artist's blank emotionless, yet intense stare, the audio of a woman's orgasm, potentially the artist's own, fills the room.

Red-Hot is comprised of three columns of televisions stacked six high, each running from floor to ceiling inside the gallery. Each screen features a single tight cropping of a bathroom wall. Intermittently the artist's back is visible within the shot as she writes on the tiled backdrop of the shower. Ramos describes her captured actions as visceral. In the creation of this project she is reconnecting with her body. Red-Hot was not originally intended to be presented as a work of art, but rather was driven by a more primal need. The action of capturing her menstrual blood and writing with it began impulsively, a ritual taken on by Ramos as her thirties came to a close and her forties commenced. A pivotal moment in female maturation is coming to terms with the inevitable end of our reproductive capabilities. This stage brings to light the priorities we have made in our lives and what we will leave behind as our legacy. Menstruation is about potential. The potential to give life. For an artist this evokes the similar possibilities of the potential of creation.

Ramos writes the following words on her bathroom wall like a disjointed poem:

GO, NOW, WHY, CALM, STOP, DO, WITH, YES, US, TRUE, PATH, COME, 39, HOME, TIME, BE, YOU. Ramos's words are presented as declarations in all capital letters. Resolute and self-assured she writes with the full palm of her hand, wiping large letters onto the tiled bathroom wall. These are words of strength and potential—aspirations, demands, and mantras. Her terse

text length is dictated by the natural limitations of the organic “paint”. The creation of Red-Hot is driven by fundamental action, with each fixed and continuous shot a month in the making. Subsequently, the project also functions as a calendar marking the passage of time and fertility.

Each repetitive shot shown on the 18 monitors is framed to establish that the artist is standing in a shower. The screens form a kaleidoscopic manifestation of the establishing shot from Psycho’s iconic shower scene, pairing Hitchcockian iconography with the language of body horror. What is surprising about Red-Hot is that for all its blood and viscera, the only hints of violence are present when Ramos begins to wipe away each sanguine text. This action manifests as aggressive defacing, reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg’s Erased DeKooning Drawing or the politicized defacement of monuments. Ramos enacts a destruction of her own work, and of the affirmations she so clearly declares on each television screen.

After this process of fierce erasure Ramos rewrites new text: WAKE, ARE, OUT, TRUST, NOT, UP, I. In doing so Ramos addresses the issue of agency. She is the one with the power to create and subsequently destroy her creation as she chooses.

As the artist reinvents and resurrects her bloody assertions Ramos establishes connections to magic and religion. Almost shamanistic in its undertaking, Ramos is presented as vulnerable through her nudity, yet empowered through her actions.

The subject of women and their power is especially timely. Post-Lean in, on-going debates of whether or not women can “have it all,” which now already seem dated, and the highly visible #metoo movement, Ramos weighs in through overt presentation of her own body and its biologic potential.

The artist makes unabashedly apparent that which is still deemed as inappropriate by most societies. There is a conceptual tension between a woman’s purity and her uncleanness brought to light here. Both polarities are tied to sex and the perceived archetypical roles of women as virgin, mother, and whore. When the artist is present in Red-Hot we see her from behind. While her face is not visible, she becomes less of an individual and more of a stand-in for all women. Ramos’s back is marked by the indentation of her recently removed bra—evoking the societal restraints placed on women.

The mark reads as an aggressive streak reminiscent not unlike a scar. Periodically on the monitors a tattoo is visible. A different kind of marking, private in its placement, the tattoo from time to time contradicts the aforementioned anonymity and neutrality of the artist’s

body. It also brings attention to the body as canvas and highlights the tension between the body of work and the body as work.

Now we come to the installation’s title. Red-hot connotes sex. Red-hot, as Ramos pointed out to me, is the description of Anna Nicole Smith wrapped up like a Valentine’s Day present on the cover of Playboy in 1994. Red-hot gets your heart pumping fast and your palms sweaty. For Ramos it surely is that and more. For her, red-hot is the perfect descriptor of menstruation both visually and viscerally. It is also an evocation of the intense pain that comes with menstruation and the hormonal exchange taking place between brain and uterus. As these two parts of the body communicate, muscles clench and, at times, wreak havoc on a woman’s quotidian relationship with her body.

Red-Hot as a title brings focused attention to commodification of women’s bodies—perhaps no more perfectly illustrated than by the aforementioned packaged and presented “red hot” Anna Nicole Smith. This is a reality that Ramos directly addresses in her work Perras y Putas (Bitches and Whores).

In this multimedia project Ramos engages in intimate conversations with prostitutes in Teneife, Aruba, and Congo-Brazzaville. In Perras y Putas, which Ramos took on from 2009-2017, the artist offered intimate and honest portraits of prostitutes in the form of photographs and videos. In contrast, for Red-Hot Ramos presents her own body and its biological potential and repackages it as video art object, which carries its own potential of commodification. In Red-Hot Ramos negotiates her position in society. As a woman of a certain age, Ramos comes to terms with her own reproductive abilities. She positions herself as an artist within this narrative and her ongoing imperative to bring creative thought to life through action. For over two years, every month, Ramos took on this ritualistic action of creation and destruction. In producing Red-Hot, Ramos places herself front and center in conversations around female empowerment—as a woman, in control of her body, her voice, and her own destiny. Time is up. Ramos demands we read the writing on the wall.