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- classifieds
- features
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- hot spot
- nation
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- art
- books
- dance
- film/movieclock
- music
- theater
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The Swan Tool: fishing for the "sweet spot"
(photo: Harrell Fletcher)

video for Sleater-Kinney and collaborated with Wayne Wang and Paul Auster. Her new video-film-theater piece, ***The Swan Tool*** (the Kitchen), wears its influences on its sleeve, most of them great women artists of the previous generation.

Previous Columns

- 11/27/01 *Neil's Garden; Finally Flannery*
- 11/20/01 *TimeSlips, Once Upon a Time in Chinese America*
- 11/6/01 *Underneath the Lintel; Square*
- 10/9/01 *The Last Barbecue; Rutherford & Son; Rhythms in the*
- 9/18/01 *3 Sisters Lounge; The Circus of Infinite Attractions; Estrogenius 2001 "celebration of women's work"*
- 8/21/01 *Truemyth by Christopher Eaves; Toasted by Elisa DeCarlo; Psychotherapy as Performance Art by Lisa Levy*
- 8/14/01 *The Moon in Vain; Gentlemen Volunteers; La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny*
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Sightlines

The Multimedia Is the Message

Miranda July, a waifish Portland native whose main claim to fame is a video chain letter called *Big Miss Moviola*, makes interdisciplinary art so fresh and full of promise that it's tempting to overpraise her now for fear of missing the hype train. An enfant terrible of the punk scene, at age 27 July has already directed a video for Sleater-Kinney and collaborated with Wayne Wang and Paul Auster. Her new video-film-theater piece, ***The Swan Tool*** (the Kitchen), wears its influences on its sleeve, most of them great women artists of the previous generation.

By accident of birth, July has the same blank features as Cindy Sherman. So when she dons a wig and headset and appears on a platform between two letterboxed video screens to narrate this live movie, it's hard not to think of a shy, whiny Sherman pretending to be Laurie Anderson. *The Swan Tool* tells the anxious, fractured story of a girl who buries herself in a garbage bag in her backyard, but somehow then goes to live at an insurance company, moonlighting by unlocking cars for people who've left their keys inside. At work, there's a man who comes by every day with a "special instrument" called a "bag" to determine whether or not the employees are still alive.

The details suggest metaphors for the experience of gender that resonate mysteriously and powerfully through this episodic piece. As much as the piece brings up *Repo Man's* wry, phallic displacement, there's something IUD-ish about the "swan tool" July brandishes each time she fishes around inside the car door in search of the "sweet spot." There's something feminist about July's indecisiveness about indecision, and something Sylvia Plath y about a girl burying a part of herself to keep up appearances. The precisely choreographed interaction between the live July and the filmed segments is delightful to watch, particularly as she rounds corners Muppet-style while office cubicles move behind her on video. By literally inserting her upper half (the unburied part?) between the video screens, July brilliantly and simply solves the usual multimedia focus problem and gives *The Swan Tool* the unity of form and content that a piece by Elizabeth LeCompte or Diller + Scofidio would have. July's ultra-dry performance, on the other hand, can sometimes be alienating in a bad way, as it muffles the material's dark humor. July could be warmer, but she's a potential trailblazer. —James Hannam