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Kalup Linzy

FOCUS

Soap operas, identity politics and sentimental songs;
humour, hysteria and sincerity



Comedy, Tragedy, Sketches of Me (2009), performance documentation, The Kitchen, New York

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Over the last few years Kalup Linzy has written, directed, and starred in a series of absurd, hilarious family sagas and tales of sexual longing, modelled after daytime soap operas. Despite, though, the fact that mass-media forms inspire these exuberant, entertaining videos, they don't really feel like art about popular culture. They are, rather, raunchy, low-rent simulations of mainstream productions – home-brewed alternatives that tap into the tawdry but undeniable affective power of their sources. Linzy portrays a multitude of (mostly female) characters, and dubs the dialogue himself, digitally altering his voice into variations ranging from a feminine mile-a-minute squeak to a butch growl. Some of the plot of his ongoing serial, 'Conversations wit de Churen' has found its way into musical form as well: last year, he recorded – in character – *SweetBerry Sonnet*, an album of homoerotic R & B ballads and created a 1980s-style music video for each of the songs.

All of Linzy's work displays an obvious affection for his pop-cultural models – his sensibility resonates with the outmoded and sentimental. There is certainly a degree of camp here, and plenty of canny play with stereotypes of race and gender, but to speak of the artist's work simply in terms of satire and subversion might be to miss the point. Throwing a monkey wrench into any notion of identity politics, he foregrounds instead the odd, twisty process of identification itself. The central quality is intimacy – in every sense of the word. The mass media forms which the artist adopts – television serials and slow-jam tunes – are those marked by a kind of artificial propinquity: the fictional characters you know as well as your family, the smoky-voiced singer whispering to you alone. The stories he tells are always, in one way or another, love stories; alongside the irony, melodrama and outrageous plot twists are all-too-familiar expressions of loss and longing, aspiration and disappointment.

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Roland Barthes tried to catalogue such expressions in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977), arguing that this language of love was 'severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority' – doomed, in other words, to sound cheap and embarrassing. Barthes' response was to stage an affirmation of this language, carried out in the first person: 'an utterance, not an analysis'. This dramatic method is the core of Linzy's strategy as well: ventriloquizing desire through a comically pluralized first person. The narratives he creates grow out of, and are structured by, the characters – and the characters themselves are defined by their thwarted needs. *All My Churen* (2003) revolves around shrill, hysterical Nucuavia as she deals with the murder of a beloved companion. We meet the rest of her family, including her languishing gay brother Taiwan, perennially drowning his heartbreak in white wine and cheap sex. *Play Wit de Churen* (2005) brings us Katonya – gender indeterminate, grotesque, and lustful, but somehow sympathetic. In *As da Art World Might Turn* (2006), Katonya becomes a farcical surrogate for Linzy himself, struggling with the demands of a high profile art opening.

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The narrative evolution of the 'Conversations wit de Churen' series – from small-town domestic drama to art world intrigue – mirrors, in many ways, Linzy's own path. He was raised in rural Florida and grew up watching soap operas with his grandmother and playing piano in church. Daytime dramas were a kind of bond in the community, tying members of the town to each other and to the past: Linzy's great-grandmother, he was told proudly, started following the world's longest running, ongoing, television soap opera, *The Guiding Light*, back when it was on the radio (from 1937 until 1952). This was the context for the artist's earliest dramatic efforts, amateur videos produced with his cousins, shot for the entertainment of family and friends.

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Last autumn, Linzy's video *Keys to Our Heart* (2008) – a black and white faux-Hollywood melodrama – was shown at Prospect.1, the New Orleans Biennial. As part of the opening weekend festivities, the artist staged a musical performance for a group of invited guests. Held at a jazz club, the evening was a strange – and strangely moving – mix of the authentic and the artificial. There was a professional band, complete with horn section and back-up singers, yet when Linzy took the stage, it was clear that this was not the club's standard fare. He performed as Taiwan: barefoot, wearing a silver leotard, a black wig, and a flower behind his ear, like Billie Holiday (or, more to the point, like Diana Ross as Holiday in the 1972 film, *Lady Sings the Blues*). This was not a drag show – Linzy was not simulating femininity, but enacting a man in need, awkwardly yet powerfully sexualized. Without any between-song patter, he ran through the *SweetBerry Sonnet* songs in a convincing, husky baritone. Perhaps the high point of the set was a cover of Bobby 'Blue' Bland's *Members Only*, the song that gave the performance its title. A bluesy ballad, it's a tribute to the ecumenical power of rejection: 'Go tell mama/ Go tell daddy/ Red or yellow, black or white/ Throwin' a party for the sad and lonely/ It's members only tonight.' It served as a fine anthem for Linzy's approach to making art, which makes hay with the usual categories, and invites all comers into a fellowship of the histrionically lovelorn.