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Breda Beban *My Funeral Song* (2010)

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Camden Arts Centre, London, UK
The 'funeral song' is not a uniquely contemporary concept at all. Yet while the Western canon has enjoyed just over half a millennium of requiem masses, with traditions surely extending far beyond that in time and cultures – and while most of us have flippantly quipped "I want this played at my funeral" for a plethora of usually less than serious reasons – the choice of a 'funeral song' does not form as much a part of common discourse as it might. Far less discussed than other points in the 'stages of man', such as the style of one's wedding dress, the preferred genders and names of one's future progeny, etc, we proudly proffer what we might like to listen to in a scenario where we are trapped on a desert island, but not so often what we might like to be heard in the inevitable event of our own death.

Breda Beban plays with this simple notion to delightfully complex effect in her newly commissioned five-screen video installation *My Funeral Song*. The artist invites five of her friends to pick the song they would most like to be played at their own funeral. The result is five separate video portraits of each individual listening to their chosen song, shot on lo-fi digital video, displayed on individual monitors sitting on simple timber-built toolshed-style 'anti-plinths'. The formation is physically staggered, with the plinths tiling diagonally into the gallery. It's also staggered temporally: the five videos, each on a loop, begin in sporadic syncopation where each piece is more or less the length of the subject's chosen song.

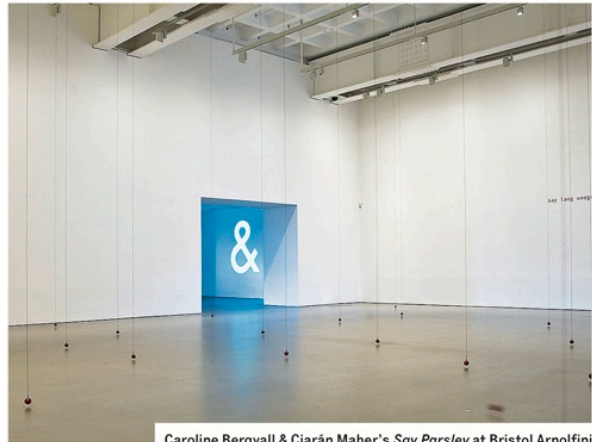
The songs themselves – all, bar one, are vocal pop ballads – seem almost par for the course. While Beban previously used music as a conduit for emotion, notably in *Little*

Songs To Cry To (2003) – exhibited here alongside her newer work – here it is the conduit for the subjects' emotions, rather than our own. The soundtrack for each monitor is presented on headphones, and the songs themselves, in the local context, are not necessarily destined to resonate with the audience: Etta James's "At Last", next to the Spanish "Alegria De Vivir" by Ray Heredia and "Naranja El Fio" by Anibal Troilo; Focus's "Hocus Pocus", providing some comic relief, sitting alongside Balkan pop ballad "Ne Volim Januar" by Djordje Balasevic.

All the subjects – two men and three women – are assumed to be around a similar age as the artist herself, and three of the five seem to be shot in the same modest apartment, perhaps the artist's home. The performances share a similar intensity that seems to arc across the lens: a shared moment between friends. Beban has been known to play with ideas about the authenticity of memory, the strategic and ethical choices that can be made in the editing stage; yet each video has barely more than a single shot, framing the human face in close-up, whether smiling in contemplation, or genuinely troubled by these bleak considerations. One friend offers Beban a glass of wine before he plays his song, and it is one of the few verbal exchanges in the series. Each portrait has the aura of a home video when viewed separately, but when grouped together a striking visual pattern emerges, as, glowing with vivacity, the five faces dance like a row of prayer candles.

The richness of this work lies in the thin membrane between such an elegantly simple idea and the multitude of questions that emerge, most of all the question of our own mortality and the complex cultural navigations around it.

Irene Revell



Caroline Bergvall & Ciarán Maher's *Say Parsley* at Bristol Arnolfini

Caroline Bergvall & Ciarán Maher *Say Parsley*

Arnolfini, Bristol, UK
Caroline Bergvall is a French-Norwegian who lives in London and writes in English. Her work has long been driven by ideas of displacement, pronunciation and translation. This exhibition sets out to explore these issues across three linked white cube spaces. Although Bergvall's writing can be quite full on the page, in this exhibition the work is uniformly spare in style. Composer Ciarán Maher's contribution is even more reduced: speech processed to make it sound something like birdsong.

In the first room, there are three simple components: speakers emitting Maher's treated speech; a short wall-mounted text on the subject of fluid identities; and a projection of the ampersand symbol as it occurs in 64 different fonts. The ampersand is, of course, a meeting point and a point of transition, a graphic emblem for a word that holds together and holds apart. With striking simplicity, the slight variations on the projected image help Bergvall probe one of her core preoccupations: the relationship between words and images.

The middle space contains the most dramatic visual material: 25 plumb weights hanging from the ceiling, each swaying slightly above a white capital letter on the floor as if seeking a point of linguistic fixity. Four short misspelt phrases run round the walls at eye height. The piece builds on deviant spelling in text messages, Creole languages, African-American music and Russell Hoban's novel *Riddley Walker*. There is, of course, a letter missing from the alphabet on the floor. It turns out to be the 'H'. Bergvall is worrying about the political implications of correct usage, the split second it normally takes for two English people to identify class position through such micro-inflections of speech as

a dropped 'h'. By the exit is a wall-mounted receptacle containing takeaway badges printed with the missing 'H'.

The final section of the exhibition takes these ideas of power and speech further, exploring the mortal risk attached to pronunciation. On one wall a sequence of mysterious words is projected and then repeated in reverse order. The words turn out to be French or Dutch acoustic translations of a series of English words that are played into the space in a monotone recording of Bergvall herself. So the spectator hears 'puddle' or 'frig' but sees 'buidel' or 'fric'. The written and the sounded are at odds, played across national and linguistic boundaries. Yet both sequences hang together: each word is connected to the words around it through phonemic or verbal similarity. The notes explain what's at stake: in the Dominican Republic in 1937 there was a massacre of tens of thousands of Creole Haitians living close to the border with Haiti. Those who were unable to pronounce the word 'perejil' (parsley) with a correctly rolled Spanish 'r' were executed. This restrained installation turns out to be telling us quite urgently how questions of parsing and parlaying become, through the innocuous medium of parsley, matters of life or death.

Through all three spaces, Maher's human/bird song is evident. It works as an ambient indicator of the plasticity of voice and as a way of gathering together the three artworks, but it doesn't add a significant dimension to the work on display. More powerful is the evolving sense through the three spaces of language's movement across sound and symbol, rule and exception, identity and difference. In each environment, Bergvall's passionate anti-authoritarianism makes persuasive use of the sparse materials on offer.

Will Montgomery

Courtesy the artist/Camden Arts Centre (Beban); Jamie Woodley (Bergvall/Maher)