

Madison Snorts at Consumerism

BY JANET SMITH

If you saw a chic pig-woman with a turned-up snout, well-coiffed bob, and armloads of shopping bags on Robson Street last year, you've had a first-hand look at the biting comic performance art of Marlene Madison.

Madison's character piece, called *Chiclette, the Posh, Urban Piglet*, is

Live at the End of the Century

what she calls a performance "intervention". Snorting through the city's toniest boutiques last Buy Nothing Day (November 27), Madison not only grabbed the shocked attention of passersby, she thumbed her prosthetic nose at today's hoglike consumerism.

Watching snippets from the video she had shot of *Chiclette's* day out, Madison laughs at people's reactions. Still, responses were not nearly as uptight in Vancouver as they were in Toronto earlier in the year, when her pig lady hit the upscale Holt Renfrew on Bloor Street: "I think because, I guess, they were really seeing themselves, they pretended I wasn't there. They're hard-core shoppers."

Settling back into an antique chair in her West End apartment, Madison continues animatedly at her off-the-odometer rate of speech: "One thing about my performance art is, I want to get across a message that's the opposite of what I do. *Chiclette* is a shopper, but the message is about overconsumption. This character is steeped in this stuff, she's caught in this brand-name loop, and I don't think there is a



Marlene Madison makes her performance accessible yet subversive.

way out, myself. What fascinates me as well is I'm as seduced as the next person by it. We're just so bombarded by all that—the billboards, TVs, and now even the buses are being painted with advertisements."

Madison will further explore the cult of consumerism in her new show, *Little Miss Mira*, which she'll unveil at the Western Front on October 15 as part of the Live at the End of the Century festival. Her latest character is a fashion-obsessed woman she says is searching for her identity through brand names. She turns to an astrologer and a psychiatrist for help—both of them portrayed in big-screen video segments that are integrated into the live show. Throughout, standup comedian Jamie Hutchinson (who collaborated with Madison on a film-noir spoof last year) performs his own monologues commenting on the theme of overconsumption and Madison's character.

Madison has been integrating humour and pop culture into her work since she began making per-

formance art as a student at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1995. Her first video piece, which she says she made when she realized she was a "very mediocre painter", was called "Five Visits to the Doctor". It was accepted into that year's Vancouver International Film Festival. The monologue, based around a woman who becomes obsessed with getting a bit of someone else's spit in her mouth, played on the kind of neuroses that have fed the explosion in antibacterial dish soaps and cleaning sprays.

From germ phobias to brand names, Madison's subjects manage to be accessible and subversive at the same time.

"People that aren't involved in the arts or haven't been exposed to performance art tend to think it's people running around naked on-stage, burning a flag, or doing something really out of reach intellectually," she says. "When I tell people I do performance art, a lot of them don't know what to say. They don't know what I do."

In a long-accepted performance-art tradition, Madison stays true to her visual-arts roots—not just by creating her own wildly imaginative sets, but in her approach. "My work is based in sociopolitical commentary, and that's what I think good art should do," she explains. "I didn't think I should go to theatre school; I didn't like the idea of repeating somebody else's words."

After debuting *Little Miss Mira* at Live at the End of the Century, Madison does intend to trot out her shopaholic Miss Piggy again—first on video, and then: "I want to take her to New York with two little *Chiclette* pigs. And *Chiclette's* going to be coming out with her own line of perfume." ■

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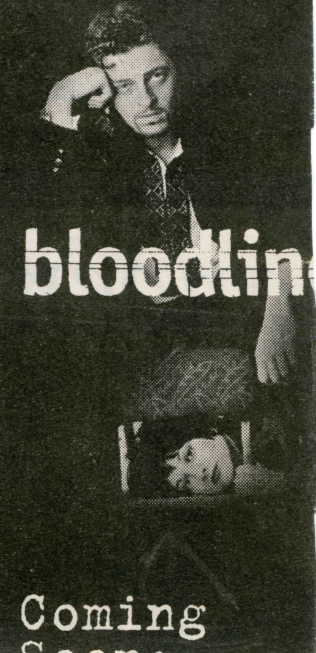
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