

Window Shopping

Over eight years, the filmmaker and artist Amy Ruhl has infiltrated L. Frank Baum's extended Oz universe, appropriating the classic American tale's glossy deceptions to spin a new fable for a precarious and ungroovy present. Her ongoing intermedial project *Between Tin Men* tells a story of labor and love, animated by narratives of commodity fetishism and feminist revolution.

At its center is a blue-haired munchkin named Nimmie Amee. A minor character plucked from *The Tin Woodman of Oz*, Nimmie is infatuated with a Tin Man who only has eyes for a fellow metallic mannequin. We follow Nimmie on a journey of unrequited desire and subsequent radicalization as her consciousness is raised by a wide-ranging cast of spirited interlocutors, all played by Ruhl. There is the resigned hag Polychrome, working to maintain her shine and keep Daddy happy. There is the scolding Mother, admonishing Nimmie Amee for her "bourgeois" attempts to appeal to the metallic class. Then there is General Jingur, who has struck off into the wilderness to create a 'commune of one.'

Spanning video, installation, live performance and sculpture, *Between Tin Men* has variously occupied the theater, the gallery, the shop window, and the internet. The project's latest iteration, an exhibition at the Kansas City Art Institute with an interactive online experience on Participant After Dark, is the most comprehensive to date.

Referencing Baum's career as a window dresser for department stores—he also wrote *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors*—Ruhl's built world is replete with the tools and tricks of commercial visual display. Featuring mirrors, buttons, turntables, and plenty of sparkle, her jewel-toned Oz is gilded yet makeshift, highly adorned yet delightfully DIY. In letting the seams show, the artist indicates the unseen labor behind the curtain.

Ruhl expands on these strategies in the digital realm: her videos and web projects glitter with enticing graphics, visual effects and online gimmicks that evince how the mediation of images has mutated and accelerated in our modern age, where curating one's own persona is just another gig.

As a performer, Ruhl slyly inhabits and code-switches between the linguistic trappings of a diverse landscape of media—from Nimmie's starry-eyed monologues straight out of a romance novel ("soft alabaster hands") to Moss Ross's halting, lecture-like speech, in the mold of Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*. In doing so, Ruhl highlights these characters' pathos as well as their contradictions ("Don't listen to what anyone except me tells you about the revolution").

Between Tin Men's story, which confronts the complexities of desire and commoditization, is itself franchised by art objects that assume the form of souvenirs. Characters' images are miniaturized, commodified and multiplied across commemorative merchandise offered to the audience on various

platforms, from a gallery gift shop to an eBay auction. Visitors to Ruhl's Oz have also been enticed to purchase gifts off the artist's public registry in exchange for bespoke performances.

In this way, Ruhl disrupts the passive spectator: we are shunted between the roles of viewer, listener, customer, patron, collaborator, daddy. With our consent we can even be financially dominated. The project operates its own economy in which goods circulate and aesthetics of chintz are reclaimed.

In the fully imagined world of *Between Tin Men*, we are invited to drift through a series of encounters at once unsettling and lulling, enticing and repelling, our attention ever prodded by clever window dressing both real and virtual. At the end of Nimmie's journey, we emerge in the gift shop, where we glimpse our image in the many reflective surfaces, as if to make sure, moment by moment, that we continue to exist.

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