

In Bed with  
**Helen Benigson**

INTRODUCING **Issue VI: Blow Up (Sex&Politics)** is excited to present two new films by artist Helen Carmel Benigson alongside an exclusive insight into the world of this provocative artist as Introducing gets under the covers with her, uncovering her real feelings towards her practice in *In Bed with Helen Benigson*, an interview and photo-essay.

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The work of Helen Benigson is a collision of all things sexy, cool and current within which lives in a world of political, religious and global interest. Making work that is oversaturated and seemingly self involved, Benigson knowingly presents a palette which plays on naivety and vulnerability in a manner that very occasionally has the potential to confuse and offend, with her complex visual language of lollipops, cupcakes, blood oranges and her own body. Helen Carmel Benigson's practice is energetic, hyper-hysterical and inspired by the pace and gloss of her generation.



INTRODUCING : First off, who are we interviewing? Helen or Princess Belsize Dollar?

*Helen Benigson: Helen*

I : In which case, who is Princess and when does she appear?

*H : Princess Belsize Dollar is me...Princess is a rapper and a facebook addict - she was born in LA and lives on Melrose. She is to appear in the next series of The Hills on MTV.*

I : Why do you feel like you need PBD, why can't it just be Helen?

*H : I don't need her - I love her, she's sexy, intelligent and an amazing lyricist.*

I : Great that's good to clear up. Let's start; we think

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that there is an undercurrent of politics and religion in your work, for example your own background is quite evident in the work, it would be interesting to know whether it appears for autobiographical reasons or if you feel that there is a particular political agenda in your work?

*H – It appears as a means of controlling the viewer.*

I : But what are you trying to use the power for?

*H : For good...*

I : Okay Obama, that's great!

I : Let's talk about one of your most recent films "You Make Me So Wet", where you use the image of the Mosque in Jerusalem in the exact same manner in which you use images of your breast and flowers for example, it seems that you are giving these images the same power and significance in the work. Could you go into that for us?

*H : In that piece I am trying to make the inside of things become the outside of things, for example the inside of the body becomes the outside of a flower, the outside of a flower becomes the inside of the body, a building becomes a breast, a breast becomes a building and I am swimming through all of them.*

I : It's not just any building.

*H : Yes – it's the Al Aqsa Mosque Jerusalem.*

I : I am interested in the levels in which you use these things, how do you manage not to create any hierarchy, is everything just material?



*H : No some images are definitely more powerful than others but they all co-exist and layer upon one another.*

I : Going on from this question, would you think that it is fair to say that religion, politics, fantasy, sex, relationships and love are all the central concerns of your practice? If so, how do you connect them?

*H : I connect them in the same way I would write an essay- so in quite an academic, polemical manner. But at the same time, it's almost dream-like and chaotic.*

I : This is a bit of an insider question, but we noticed that Sophie Calle is the screen saver of you Black-Berry, what is it about her that you are drawn to?



*H : Because she makes work about her boyfriend which is dope.*

*I : Perfect answer, if you would allow us we would like to draw a connection to another female artist, Tracey Emin. Looking at Emin's work it has this feeling that we are reading her diary, in the sense that it is too literal which leaves no room for imagination and interpretation on the behalf of the viewer. However, although this is an easy comparison we feel that your work, though expressive and autobiographical, is certainly not literal. How do you maintain that balance and where do you draw the line?*

*H : The difference is that with Emin it is like reading her diary but with my work it is like looking at my facebook profile and printing it out and then sticking it on your walls, floor and in your bed...there are unanswered questions in my work which I am still trying to untangle.*

*I : Maybe you don't need to, because the balance between the questions raised and the questions answered is what makes your work fascinating and engaging.*

*H : Maybe*

*I : What we find possibly the most interesting thing about your work are the different levels of interaction which you command; although the work is almost always instantly appealing, you work with vast mediums and your work almost always provides different levels of engagement for the viewer. Primarily this is why we think that your work is most effective in the form of larger installations with layers of elements providing clues to your world. Based on this observation, is there an ideal reaction to your work?*

*H : I don't have an ideal reaction - that is not what interests me or inspires me to produce work.*

I : We think it is interesting how you have these really loaded subject matters but you use yourself as a vehicle to put these messages across so in a way it removes the ability for people to get angry because that's you.

*H : Haha*

I : Would you say that everything in your life is somehow material? How do you edit?

*H : I copy and paste then delete*

I : In a sense you are a direct product of our time.

*H : Yes I would agree with that, now can you ask me what are my top five things?*

I : What are they?

*H : The Hills, Sushi.....Baking, Tanning, Butternut...no not butternut, Late Night Poker.*

I : Facebook isn't one of your top five things? Is it a material?

*H : No def not Facebook.*

I – Let's go back to the motif topic in relation to how prolific you are, I would venture to say that you are more prolific than most people, let's face it you have made two films this week. There are certain things that continuously reappear in your work, do they work as ingredients to ensure a high level of productivity?

*H – It's not about ingredients that work or don't work - it's about loving making many things at the same time, and it's about making as much as I can.*

I : The subconscious aspect is really interesting to us as it isn't something that we have ever thought about your work.

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*H : Well when I can't sleep I usually think of something and then write it down on my BlackBerry at two or three in the morning and then make the piece the next day.*

*H : Now do you want to interview Princess with the same questions?*

I : Sure, Are we interviewing Helen or Princess Belsize Dollar?

*H : Princess but I can't be bothered to do the whole interview again.*

I : Is that Princess' answer?

*H : Yes.*



INTRODUCING interviewed Helen Benigson in the artist's bedroom, Oct. 2009

**PROVOCATIONS IN PINK** by Paul Carey Kent

© Philippa Found, *The Body in Women's Art Now: Part 2- Flux. Essays* by Philippa Found, Tracey Warr and Paul Carey-Kent, 2010, ROLLO Contemporary Art

Helen Carmel Benigson's videos *Wet/Wet* (2010) and *Saturation Between My Legs* (2009) form part of a provocative practice which turns on two different but compatible ways of exploring boundaries.

First, Benigson directly probes such borders as those between the self and the world; art and life; power and submission; the natural and the artificial; sex and violence; consumerism and religion; and inside and outside. Evidently, she is no respecter of conventionally-drawn lines.

Second, Benigson operates at the edges of aesthetic boundaries, close to the cloying, the hackneyed, the sentimental, the girlish. Taking the risk of slipping into the 'wrong' – i.e. non-art – category has provided many contemporary artists with an effective dynamic. The way Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin work with pornography and kitsch, or Takashi Murakami and Yoshimoto Nara spin off from manga, provide parallel examples – though perhaps Shana Moulton's use of new age imagery and Sylvie Fleury's exploitation of advertising glamour are closer to Benigson's spirit.

Born in London in 1985, Benigson has always seen herself as making art, though that includes rap performances as well as printmaking and, most typically, videos – often shown in installations which crank up the heady atmosphere. She has a Jewish background, has often visited Israel and is a practising religious believer. That doesn't stop her – and why should it? – foregrounding sexuality in her work, though that conjunction is an interesting and potentially uncomfortable one.

Benigson works cumulatively, in that she has developed a set of obsessions-come-symbols and a personal language in which they are set. Both recur in different forms from film to film. Layered meanings accrue through the repeated use of lollipops; cupcakes; globes; eyes; liquids; guns; the Wailing Wall; flowers, especially roses; and a mania for pink. The style is also cumulative: rap and the musical track as a structuring device; video overlays and inserts; colour intensification; the use of surrogates; sexual blooming. As a result her work is highly distinctive visually, and the recurring motifs allow us to read through one work into the others and build up a sense of her world.

By way of illustration, Benigson's earlier video works include the soft-hard contrast of a pink underwear-clad dance with a gun (*Planes* (2009)); a sexual rap to images of explosions and the Wailing Wall (*Blow Up* (2009)); semi-naked gyrations in which virtual hearts seem to infest her breasts (*Micro Soft* (2009)); a profession of desire for the phallic gun regardless of the threat of venereal disease, apparently represented by viral lollipops and set, paradoxically, in a cleansing pool (*Ani Ochivet Your Gun Even Though It Causes Infection* (2009)); and the female sexualisation of an archetypal male pursuit (*Playing Football Inside You* (2010)). Nearly all feature pink roses, whether straight, as video collages, or in wallpaper on the set.

Much of Benigson's world might be described as 'hyper-feminine' in a traditional sense. It would be easy to think that this is an assertive exaggeration of what might be seen as negative stereotypes of women's interests. Consider John Berger's succinct statement in 'Ways of Seeing' (1972): 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.'<sup>1</sup>

An assertion of the feminine world would meet the criticism of earlier feminists for seeking to challenge male power by adopting male paradigms – Margaret Thatcher as a 'better man' than her Cabinet colleagues, for instance. But it would still be defining women, indirectly, in response to the male gaze - and that's not what Benigson wants to do. Rather, her enthusiasm for 'girlish things' is genuine, unironic and independent of any take on feminist positions. 'Anything sweet, anything dairy' is her summary<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, Benigson says that if she could she would sooner run a supermarket than make art, though presumably the Benigson Mart might turn out to be art anyway.

In a parallel way, her sexuality is displayed as much for women as for men, and from a position not of ignorance or rejection of the norms and options for challenging stereotypes, but of having moved beyond the debate in the terms in which Berger couches it. It's not, I think, that Benigson defies orthodox views about what feminine empowerment or political correctness or religious piety ought to be: it's that she doesn't even dignify those orthodoxies with the need for defiance, and so gives them no chance to influence her by how she reacts against them.

So that's one group of border issues: Benigson sets equally to one side the traditional boundaries on women, the potentially conservative strictures of her own religious beliefs, and the revisionist views of feminists. She does so in order to make fresh use of an aesthetic which blithely rubs up against the edges of the saccharine and of conventional male

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, John *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p.47.

<sup>2</sup> In the video 'MTV Infection'



fantasy. The second group of boundaries is brought into play by setting off contrasts in the content of the work itself. I will consider how Benigson does that for issues around personal identity, the ambiguous nature of 'inside' and 'outside', and the question of who is in control.

Our traditional sense of our own personal identity makes a strong distinction between how things appear to us from the inside and how they look to others outside of us. The nature of that distinction may have been challenged by behaviourists and radically explored by phenomenology, but its common sense grip remains powerful. We are, though, forever seeing inside Benigson's protagonists, as through the globe which opens up an inner world in *Saturation Between My Legs*. There's a reference here, I think, to the more directly anatomical use of interior video by Pipilotti Rist and Mona Hartoum, but with the new twist that the inner body reveals the thought process. Benigson says her friends tell her that 'looking at my work is like looking inside my brain'<sup>3</sup>, and that seems so, though I would expand it a little to say that we see into and through the body of Benigson (and her alter egos) and find... a mind. It can feel a little like a female take on that typical summation of male obsession: 'he thinks with his cock'.

The distinction of the self from others is also broken down in a playful way, for Benigson uses at least three 'selves'. In addition to Helen Carmel, there's her own rapper persona, 'Princess Dollar Belsize', in whose guise she appears in performance and in some videos, she uses her cousin as a frequent video surrogate, saying that 'she is like another version of me'<sup>4</sup>. She also has an alter ego male rapper proclaim her words while a rabbi prays simultaneously (*Sweet Baby Sexy Girl Works* (2009)), and has adopted a collage made by her boyfriend from her own photographs as her usual source of rose images.

It's pretty clear where the control lies, though. We hear Benigson repeatedly directing her cousin in *I Like It When My Body Goes Boom Boom Boom* (2009) to come 'closer, closer to me'. Benigson has chosen the prayers for the priest and written the words for the rapper— he must now, it seems, attempt to seduce her at her command with the words she wrote to seduce him. Or maybe it's all to seduce us, like a refracted play on Vito Acconci's *Theme Song* (1973). In that film the artist, with a disturbing assumption of intimacy, manipulatively and hypnotically attempts to seduce his viewer before eventually admitting pathetically that 'I'm only kidding myself...You're not here.'

Acconci's game seems prescient of the atmosphere of the more menacing aspects of internet chat, and it does feel as if we're seeing an online version of Benigson – constructed, as the online world can so easily be, out of as many fictions

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with the artist, 8.6.2010

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the artist, 8.6.2010

she wishes. It certainly feels like the generation after the YBAs, and Benigson herself says she finds Tracey Emin's work 'is like reading her diary', whereas her own 'is like looking at my Facebook profile and printing it out and then sticking it on your walls, your floor and in your bed'<sup>5</sup>.

Given this background, we can see how *Wet/Wet* and *Saturation Between My Legs* pull together Benigson's themes. *Wet/Wet* bursts into hypnotically-coloured triple-layered images of a multi-cultural mix which includes the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, standing in for Benigson's more often-seen globe; the Wailing Wall; sushi, which seems to morph into her more characteristic roses; and plenty of liquid and flowers. Benigson plays herself, and the soundtrack is Cheryl Cole singing 'Fight for This Love'. In the Israeli context, the words 'Anything that's worth having / Is sure enough worth fighting for' gain a political import Cheryl probably intended no more than she meant to foreshadow the recurrence of problems with husband Ashley. There are also some irruptions from ambient sound, which turns out to include Paris Hilton's sex tape: it is typical of Benigson to take a bit of ownership when she uses other people's music by playing it in a specific place, as affected by her world, not simply as it is in its digital purity. *Wet/Wet* concludes with an extra-large rose, a cupcake with a nipple-like cherry on top and the sound of wailers at the wall: a video supermarket mix of the personal and political rubbing up against any number of potential boundaries.

Benigson's cousin plays her part in *Saturation Between My Legs*. The integration of a screen-sized eye into the layered images emphasises her gazed-upon status, but she adopts a blank expression which challenges us to wonder what she makes of her apparent objectification. We can only conclude that she doesn't care. Or care what we think. She sits with a globe between her legs, but with a circle of imagery imposed on it. That may stand, we can surmise from the symbols used in other videos, not just for the obvious globe, eye and vagina but also for a speculum, a Petri dish with bacteria, a pool, the stigma of a flower (containing, of course, the female parts) and the worldwide saturation of images. At several points the globe fills with fireworks, at once violent and orgasmic. The last frame shows a rose cut into a rose: what's in an alter ego, one may ask, that by any other name Benigson's tastes remain as sweet?

Overall, then, Helen Carmel, Princess Belsize Dollar and her cousin lure us into plenty of layered complexity through their seductive visual hooks. Or as Benigson's rap invitation provocatively puts it 'you should come and link me late one night'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Introducing , 'In Bed With Helen Benigson', Introducing Issue VI: Sex and Politics, October 2009, <http://helenbenigson.com/cupcakes/INTRODUCING%20interview.html>, accessed 9.6.2010

<sup>6</sup> Lyrics from song by Princess Belsize Dollar (Helen Carmel Benigson) "Sweet and Sticky" 2009.

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