

JUNGLE SWEAT, ROSEATE

NAOMI FISHER

OCTOBER 7, 2011 — JANUARY 16, 2012

CONTEMPORARY
ARTS
PROJECT

VIZCAYA
MUSEUM & GARDENS

JUNGLE SWEAT, ROSEATE

NAOMI FISHER

The Contemporary Arts Project (CAP) is a commission program that invites artists to develop site-specific work inspired by Vizcaya, a public museum and National Historic Landmark in Miami, Florida. The program is intended to reinvigorate Vizcaya with the creative exchange that characterized its foundation, engaging artists whose practices can establish a dialogue or critique with the physical and cultural contexts of the place.

Naomi Fisher grew up in Miami, and Vizcaya has held a place in her imagination since she was a small child. Under the influence of South Florida, her photographs, performances, paintings and videos are often set in lush tropical landscapes. Fisher populates these primeval settings with mythological creatures, forces of nature and glamorous post-atomic city dwellers. The women who inhabit this universe explore their surroundings and engage in discoveries and conflicts. The tension between nature and culture as well as the politics of gender are at the core of Naomi Fisher's work, yet her art is pervaded by a visionary irony, a subversive comical strain that becomes apparent in her costumes and performances.

Jungle Sweat, Roseate (2011), the project Fisher created for CAP, weaves these themes with her memories and fantasies of Vizcaya. Because of her familiarity with the estate, Fisher was adept at staging, within the architectural spaces of the house and gardens, the visions that had floated in her mind for decades. Her project consists of a video and several installations on the second floor of the Main House; among these is a screen specifically created in response to a screen in Vizcaya's collection. The video and the objects are related, as if the characters of the video had left traces of themselves throughout the house for the museum's visitors to discover.

In the video, Vizcaya becomes a home of women: the Lady of the House, a solitary, posh young girl, who glows, albeit sadly, in her ownership of the estate; her ladies-in-waiting, two slender mermaid creatures clad in turn-of-the-century lace; and PB, a creature of the forest who appears in the wild extremities of the gardens. Upon her arrival, PB is uncertain, but curious, and begins exploring this strange place. The mermaids quickly find PB and make plans for her to serve as a diversion for the Lady of the House. Once PB is groomed and dressed, the Lady of the House begins to "civilize" her by providing absurd history lessons based on misinterpretations of objects and elements at Vizcaya. At first, PB is mesmerized, but soon she harbors desires of making Vizcaya her

own. The Lady of the House begins to perceive a threat to her dominion and to the order of things that Vizcaya represents: the taming of nature, the right to own art and culture, the class structure that makes an estate like Vizcaya possible. Through a narrative built around fantasy and flashes of the characters' internal visions, *Jungle Sweat, Roseate* addresses conflicts surrounding power, ownership and knowledge amidst a playful, joyfully decadent and happily subversive takeover of the estate. Fisher's video takes us into realms that are at once dark and violent as well as sunny and comedic.

While developing her project, Fisher became very involved with Vizcaya's history, focusing on the artists who created works for the estate in the 1910s. She found a particular connection with one of these artists, Robert Winthrop Chanler (1872–1930). Chanler could have been the typical high-society artist: he came from an upper-class background and his clients were all members of New York's smartest set. Yet, he was a complicated man, an eccentric collector of exotic birds with an uncanny imagination and an encyclopedic knowledge of natural history. The subject matter of his work was always animals, which he arranged in complex decorative patterns—beautiful, yet unsettling. Even if a century and profoundly different world-views set Fisher and Chanler apart, nature and interpretations of it are at the core of both these artists' work.

Chanler created the stucco relief on the ceiling of Vizcaya's swimming pool where he depicted a myriad of tropical sea creatures floating in the water. He also painted a screen for the estate's patron, James Deering, titled *Vizcayan Bay* (1920). This screen, never exhibited publicly, was an inspiration for Fisher and will be displayed alongside her contemporary screen as part of this installation. *Vizcayan Bay* is a representation of the discovery of Florida, a subject particularly dear to Deering. On the screen, caravels appear in an idyllic tropical lagoon filled with stylized birds and plants, fantastic sea creatures and classical-looking "natives" who greet the explorers. In Fisher's video, Chanler's screen becomes the subject of an absurd history lesson about the right to conquer and the excitement of discovery, as taught by the Lady of the House.

Vizcaya was conceived as a fantasy come true. With *Jungle Sweat, Roseate*, Naomi Fisher has added another layer to this fantasy, contemporary and critical—yet playful and visually striking—like Vizcaya itself. In her own words, Fisher's approach to the place has been, "fantastical accuracy."

Flaminia Gennari-Santori, Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs

CONTEMPORARY
ARTS
PROJECT
VIZCAYA
MUSEUM & GARDENS

CAP is supported by The Danielson Foundation, Harpo Foundation, Stella M. Holmes, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and Chauncey and Marion D. McCormick Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by: The Vizcayans; the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; and the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture.

NAOMI FISHER



Naomi Fisher is an artist whose wide-ranging practice includes live performance, photography, painting and works on Vizcaya, where the imposition of formal architecture on a native landscape presents striking contrasts. Fisher has exhibited internationally at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Pinchuk Art Centre (Kiev, Ukraine), Halle für Kunst (Lüneburg, Germany), Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (Kansas City, MO), Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna), Kunsthaus Baselland (Basel), Deste Foundation (Athens) and New Museum (New York). Fisher is a recipient of a 2008 Knight Arts Challenge Grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. She co-founded and jointly directs the Bas Fisher Invitational, an artist-run space in Miami.

A conversation between Flaminia Gennari-Santori, Vizcaya's Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs and Naomi Fisher.

FGS: Because you grew up in Miami, you have a long-standing relationship with Vizcaya. How would you describe that relationship?

NF: Growing up in Miami, Vizcaya became an architectural archetype in my imagination. All of my childhood fantasies involving a castle were based on Vizcaya. I remember women dressed only in chain mail at one of the Renaissance fairs that took place here. I still have a black and white photograph of one of the garden structures that I colored when I was in the fifth grade, along with middle school sketchbooks filled with drawings of girls in Grecian gowns that I imagined wandering through the gardens. I often dream of architectural spaces and Vizcaya with its decorated rooms—each one a dream of its own—is profoundly evocative for me. I also deeply relate to the desire to create a place that provides a unique refuge from the everyday. As I became an adult, the castle of my childhood evolved into a quirky metaphor for the absurdities of wealth, class conflicts and frustration with privilege and access. Vizcaya is, in my mind, at once fascinating and contradictory.

FGS: In *Jungle Sweat, Roseate*, Vizcaya becomes the stage for a narrative exploring themes that run deep in your work. How does it relate to your previous projects?

NF: My past work has dwelt in the woods, wilderness and the expansive realm of the imaginary. However, this is the first time that one of my characters has stepped out of the forest and into a home. As in much of my work, the clash between nature and culture, and power and the conflicts associated with it are the underlying themes. The two main characters, PB and the Lady of the House, embody the contradictory dynamic between “nature” and “civilization.” The character representing nature, PB, was also in my previous video titled *Myakka*. There, she was a solitary forest dweller. Here, she stumbles upon Vizcaya and its inhabitants: the young, haughty Lady of the House and her two mermaid-like ladies-in-waiting. The Lady of the House provides surreal history lessons to the savage PB. The Lady of the House’s misinterpretation of history, which in some ways parallels how styles, cultures and materials are utilized in Vizcaya’s decor, is yet another layer in the video. As the story progresses, PB begins to challenge the Lady of the House and to harbor fantasies of taking her place. Ultimately, the narrative is a loose structure populated with fantasies: luxury and decadence, class warfare and murder, general fun and frolicking. Vizcaya provided the perfect setting in which to stage them.

NAOMI FISHER

FGS: In your video, you included a performance presented at Vizcaya, *Isadora Chain Gang*. What is the relationship between the performance and the overall narrative of the video?

NF: When I was in high school, I came to Vizcaya for an ethereally beautiful performance by the Isadora Duncan Dance Ensemble. One of the dancers was Nikki Rollason, who helped develop the structure for the sequence I refer to as *Isadora Chain Gang*. The performance in the video originated from my memories of the performance at Vizcaya, but there is more to it. Like Vizcaya, Duncan's dance today looks almost classical, but her style was radical and rebellious at the time. The ideas that inspired Vizcaya may not have been as revolutionary as those that inspired Duncan but, still, the estate was conceived of as a playful, irreverent pastiche of classical styles. That original inherent playfulness was subdued with the transformation of Vizcaya into a public museum. Conversely, the idea of freedom at the core of Duncan's dance was lost in later interpretations of her choreography. This performance is my reflection of the tension and ironies between freedom and rule. I've included it in this piece as a tribute to Duncan's radicalism—*Isadora Chain Gang* is fun and irreverent, but also subversive.

I have worked with the same group of performers for years, resulting in decade-long friendships, a shared vision and the ability for these individuals to perform

convincingly, intuitively and naturally. My explanations to them are minimal and they "perform" my ideas in ways that are both unexpected and harmonious with my vision. Unlike previous performances, we had a much larger audience for this piece and wanted to take maximum advantage of the varied settings in Vizcaya's gardens. As we filmed, we invited the audience to discover the performances in these different areas.

FGS: In addition to the video, you also used elements of the collection and placed your own artworks as installations in some of the rooms on the second floor. During this project, what has been your relationship with Vizcaya's collection?

NF: While developing the project, I spent a great deal of time at Vizcaya exploring the collection on my own and with the curatorial staff. Thanks to Assistant Curator Gina Wouters's research on early twentieth-century artists at Vizcaya, I became fascinated with Robert Winthrop Chanler. He painted murals and screens populated by exotic birds and fantastic underwater creatures. He was a decorator with an eerie, almost surreal sense of darkness, which deeply resonated with me. One of his screens, *Vizcayan Bay* (1920), is featured in my video. It represents the discovery of Florida as an Eden populated by classical-looking natives and fantastic flora and fauna. The screen provides the subject for one of the absurdist history lessons that the Lady of the House gives to PB as part

of the video's narrative. I love this object, even though it is an idyllic representation of a bloody conquest. I decided to respond to it with my own screen and to place various other objects throughout the house, as if *Jungle Sweat, Roseate's* characters had found their way into the building, left their traces in the rooms and made them their own. As if PB's dreams of conquest became true.

FGS: You created this project with and for Vizcaya. How did working in the context of a historic house impact your work?

NF: This is the largest project with the most developed script that I have ever done; and it is my first video with dialogue. In this project, we faced a new complexity and scale of production. The support and collaboration with the museum was crucial and, as in the case of Chanler's screen, shaped the final product. Being able to place objects in a historic house, rather than a typical "white cube" gallery environment, lends a completely different perspective to my artwork. The context gives the work a home, a time, a counterpoint. At Vizcaya, I have placed some objects in rooms where the video was shot, which adds another dimension to the characters. It makes them seem real, as if they were physical beings who have just left a room and may soon come back to it. I could continue exploring Vizcaya, my memories of it and the way it resonates with wider cultural, aesthetic and political issues for years.

The artist would like to thank Felicia Ballos, Erin Falls, Jessie Gold, Elizabeth Hart, Heather Maloney, Stella Rey and Nikki Rollason for their inspiring performances; SKINT for their ongoing sonic collaborations; Clifton Childree, Alina Gatti, Javier Gatti-Hernandez, Jay Israelson, Bec Stupak and Johnny Woods for their creativity and collaboration with technical solutions; Loren Pulitzer of Meals That Heal; Brian Booth, Jim Drain, Marcia Martinez, Danny Santiago and Borscht Corp for their generosity; and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for their ongoing support.

Contemporary Art @ Vizcaya Guided Tours

Sundays, October 16, November 13, 2011; and January 15, 2012
3:30 p.m., Courtyard

James Deering, Vizcaya's owner, engaged artists to create several important works that are integral to the architecture and character of Vizcaya. Gain insight into the contemporary art of Deering's time and how artists interpret the estate in their work today. Museum curators will lead you through early 20th-century works at Vizcaya and the current Contemporary Arts Project by Naomi Fisher.

\$10 plus applicable cost of admission; reservations required as space is limited. For additional information or to reserve, please contact Susan Caraballo at susan.caraballo@vizcayamuseum.org or 305-860-8423.

Conversation with the Artist: Naomi Fisher

November 9, 2011
7:00 p.m., Courtyard

Visitors are invited to explore the exhibition throughout the Main House from 6:00 – 7:00 p.m.

Maria Buszek, will join Naomi Fisher in a conversation about *Jungle Sweat, Roseate* and its connections with filmmaking, surrealism and contemporary art production. Dr. Buszek, Associate Professor of Art History at University of Colorado, Denver, and author of *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2006), has followed Naomi Fisher's work for many years.

Tickets \$5; free for Members, Seniors and Students with ID.