

COOLING OUT ON THE PARADOX OF FEMINISM.

LEWIS GLUCKSMAN GALLERY, CORK
1 SEPTEMBER - 26 NOVEMBER

That curators from Germany, Switzerland and Ireland managed to pull off three parallel exhibitions addressing feminism in contemporary practice is an enormous achievement. Although many of feminism's goals have not been achieved (or are increasingly under threat), the public sphere is still dominated by men and the human subject remains the masculine subject, the currency and gains of feminism are taken for granted.

To address the continued hegemony of masculine discourse without falling into essentialist stereotypes presents a tricky challenge to artists and curators. Rather than celebrate how feminism brought vibrant activism to a cultural aesthetic and established some of the touchstones of postmodernism – fragmentation, diversity, subjectivity and pluralism – this show highlights the following paradox: 'how can a political or social movement create so many positive changes, while simultaneously developing negative connotations?' It tackles questions like 'Why

do people who believe in the equality of women not call themselves feminists?' and 'Is equality based on a binary notion of gender what women want after all?' Why care about feminism if you can pass as a man and relish access to male privilege, as do the women in the video *Boygirl* (2002), by Aurora Reinhard? Did feminism ever impinge on the fantasies of the teenage girls in Elodie Pong's *Pretty, Pretty* (1998–2004), who demonstrate no desire to act in the world as anything other than wife and mother? Nor is nine-year-old Priscilla, the eponymous P-star of Dani Gal's documentary, any closer to self-determination. P-star may be the youngest female rap star out of Harlem, citing J-Lo as her heroine, but every word she utters, rhymed or otherwise, is tightly scripted by her domineering Pops. Grrl-power or just old-fashioned paternal bullying? Gal leaves it up to us to decide, and this typifies the distancing approach of artists here.

In *Larissa* (2006), Una Quigley films an erotic dancer in street clothes going through her routine to unheard music in her small living room. Voiceover tells us Larissa loves her job, but the low-rent environment and the caged effect achieved by an overhead camera suggest Quigley's ambivalence. One of the more compelling pieces is *Casting James Dean* (2004), by Cabello/Carceller, in which several women get the job of playing Dean in a scene from *Rebel without a Cause*. Sultry-boy pouting, girlish insouciance and gruff machismo interpret the Hollywood icon through Spanish culture, reflecting the mobility and inventiveness of gender itself, neatly collapsing the idea of femininity and masculinity as separate and exclusive.

Overall the show is disparate; not passionately and provocatively, but rather in a listless and disconnected way, suggesting that today's artists regard feminism's vital legacy as a dwindling residue. Without the driving energy and vision of a powerful political movement behind it, art can no longer accommodate the gap between the rousing critical discourses around inequality and the private experiences of disenfranchisement. Embarrassment and apology have replaced indignation.
Cherry Smyth

