

Transgression is Survival for Michelle Handelman's 'Hustlers' at SFMOMA

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"Hypnotic" is the operative word here. In SFMOMA's White Box gallery space, the three video channels project large onto adjacent walls, alternating focus between the three "hustlers," played by artists, musicians and performers Shannon Funchess, John Kelly and Viva Ruiz. Filling the gallery floor below are portable stages, props from the video and light stands holding 2D replicas of video cameras. Other stands support T-shirts bearing the faces of young Terence Stamp (star of *Toby Dammit*), Duras and Slim.

As the trio swaps in and out of consistently fabulous outfits (including a sequence in which everyone looks like the space opera version of themselves), Funchess, Kelly and Ruiz embody the roles of Slim, Dammit and Duras, respectively. They speak to the difficulty of surviving in a capitalist, normative world that's built to marginalize them. They relate stories of abuse and violence. And, in the most thrilling sequences of the video, they sing and dance.



Still from Michelle Handelman's 'Hustlers & Empires,' 2018. *(Courtesy of the artist)*

“The songs were really the heart of the piece for me,” Handelman says. “The reason I selected these performers was because they’re all amazing singers.” Each performer (sometimes in collaboration with Handelman) wrote two songs from the point of view of their character.

Funchess sings in a cyborg-esque rock star get-up of black leather and extreme shoulder pads. Kelly, his style described in Handelman’s production notes as “crumpled fashionable rogue,” sings in a serene voice about crossfades, dreams and the devil. Ruiz does an electronic dance number in thigh-high boots.

Their glamorous facades are undeniable. “Surfaces are fascinating,” Handelman says, “because surfaces are very deep. The more artifice people wear, the deeper the pain that’s masking. And I’m really interested in trying to get to both the character and the performer’s vulnerability — and let it leak out the shiny veneer.”



John Kelly as Toby Dammit in Michelle Handelman's 'Hustlers & Empires,' 2018. (Courtesy of the artist)

Interspersed between the music video moments are monologues from the characters in varying layers of costume. Handelman wants to dissolve the lines between performer and character, acting and being, because for her, “It doesn’t matter who says what, it matters what’s been said.” Fictions, after all, are informed by and influence facts.

Even though each of the stories Handelman draws upon in *Hustlers & Empires* is set in a very particular place and time (1929 Saigon, mid-20th-century Chicago and 1960s Rome), the resulting video takes place on a soundstage she alternately calls a “void space,” “limbo” or “the talk show.” “I’m not interested in making period recreations of anything, ever,” she says.

The characters sit at a round table answering philosophical questions like “What gets you out of bed in the morning?” Canned laughter and applause tracks play at inappropriate moments. In Handelman’s hands, Slim, Duras and Dammit become contemporary, or perhaps more accurately: timeless. Their struggles against “empires” — repressive governments, racism, gender taboos, sexual mores, societal expectations — are as relevant now as they were in their respective times.



Viva Ruiz as Marguerite Duras in Michelle Handelman's 'Hustlers & Empires,' 2018. (Photo: Mr. Means)

A physical footnote to the three-channel video nails that relevancy. On a separate screen, without sound, costume or script, the talk show set reappears darker and less surreal. Funchess, Kelly and Ruiz return to answer the same questions (“What are you resisting?” “What is empire?”), but this time as themselves.

As an added layer of "realness," their raw answers embody a line repeated by all three characters in *Hustlers & Empires*: "You have no idea how weak I am."



'Hustlers & Empires' is on view at SFMOMA through March 18, with live performances on Saturday, March 17, 1-4pm and a special performance with Shannon Funchess, John Kelly and Viva Ruiz the same day at 6pm. For more information, [click here](#).