FIG. 1 Still from *Cinderella*, by Ericka Beckman. 1986. (© Ericka Beckman).

FIG. 2 Still from *Cinderella*, by Ericka Beckman. 1986. (© Ericka Beckman).

FIG. 3 Still from *Udder*, by Marianna Simnett. 2014. (© Marianna Simnett, Jerwood/FVU Awards).

FIG. 4 Still from *Hiatus*, by Ericka Beckman. 1999. (© Ericka Beckman).
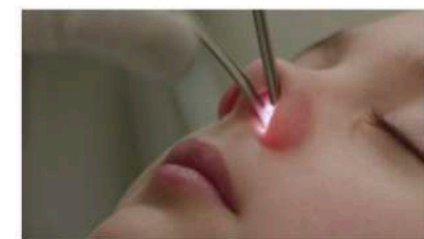

FIG. 5 Still from *Blood*, by Marianna Simnett. 2014. (© Marianna Simnett, Jerwood/FVU Awards).

Ericka Beckman and Marianna Simnett

by Amelia Crouch
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'Try and keep the dress; if you catch the prince you keep the dress'. A duo of voices on the soundtrack of Ericka Beckman's *Cinderella* (1986) directs these sing-song instructions to the film's titular protagonist FIG. 1. They introduce the 'rules' of the game, for Beckman's fairytale adopts the structure and aesthetic of early computer adventure games. Bright block colours and dayglo lines stand out against a black backdrop; electronic music and animation blend with live action and handmade props FIG. 2. The dress, which appears unbidden in a gift-wrapped cardboard box, is a token that initiates Cinderella's quest.

Beckman commenced her career as a filmmaker in 1970s America and is known for her examination of the societal expectations placed on women. Her female leads find themselves controlled by the desires of others – as represented here by the double-dealing voices that soon switch temperament from fairy godmother to ugly sisters, declaiming 'put her in her place, get back the dress'. At FACT, Liverpool, her films *Cinderella* and *Hiatus* (1999–2015) are paired with recent video works by Marianna Simnett, a younger British artist who came to prominence as the winner of the 2014–15 Jerwood/FVU Awards. Simnett's magic-realist tales are stylistically very different but similarly foreground female leads. *The Udder* (2014) and *Blood* (2015) share the girl heroine Isabel, whose resplendent blonde hair recalls an archetypal fairy-tale princess FIG. 3. In *The Udder* footage of Isabel exploring the dairy farm where she lives is intercut with close-ups of mechanised milking. Advice parroted by Isabel about appropriate modes of behaviour ('she said that I was too beautiful to play outside') merges with warnings about bovine mastitis ('exposure to the outside world opens up risk of invasion') as she tests the limits placed upon her as a girl.

Simnett's film portrays behaviour within a familial setting (subject formation begins at home) but blends domestic directives with the normative influence of children's stories and medicalised farming texts. In a vacillation of voices that parallels Beckman's work, the ultimate source and referent of characters' words is often ambiguous. Notably, too, both filmmakers' lead characters break into song. Cinderella – after hurrying between her basement workplace and Prince's palace at the bidding of a clock tower bell – finds her voice part-way through the film in a musical-theatre style rendition, declaring that she will no longer play the game but instead subvert its rules. Isabel, conversely (in a buoyant song about mastitis and chastity), continues to mimic the words of others.

For Beckmann, song represents an enabling mode of linguistic communication; Simnett instead foregrounds bodily aspects of voice. This is viscerally apparent in the exhibition's only non-fiction work – *Faint with Light* (2016). Combining audio with a glaring wall of undulating light, the installation documents Simnett deliberately hyperventilating until she faints. Rapid, shallow breathing terminates in a thud of collapse and a startling (remarkably bovine) groan, before the artist gasps and begins the whole process again.

What, then is the purpose or power of these works? What does showing these two artists together add to each? In the first instance, Beckman's works are fun. Their exuberant sound and colourful design is appealing and (for a child of the 1980s or 1990s) elicits a hint of nostalgia. But there is a

FIG. 6 Still from *Blood*, by Marianna Simnett. 2014. (© Marianna Simnett, Jerwood/FVU Awards).

FIG. 7 Installation view *Ericka Beckmann & Marianna Simnett* at FACT, Liverpool (courtesy the artist; photograph Rob Battersby).

serious message. *Hiatus* – which expands the cyber aesthetic into a two-channel format – resulted from research alongside NASA computer scientists and conversations with the virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier. We follow Madi who dons a Virtual Reality (VR) bodysuit to become Wanda – a pink-tinted avatar FIG. 4. Wanda's task is to build a virtual garden; a self-selected alternative world. Her self-actualisation is not seamless; a blue hued cowboy representing misogyny and corporate greed attempts to thwart her quest. But Wanda overcomes him. *Hiatus,* like *Cinderella,* is a narrative about empowerment. It recalls a belief in the utopian potential of VR held by its developers and early adopters. In our era of online hate speech and corporate technology dominance, it serves to remind us of technology's nascent potential not just to reiterate norms but to challenge them. It advocates too the importance of spaces from which to imagine an alternative world from the one we find ourselves in.

Simnett's work is altogether more unsettling, both because of its gory footage (diseased udders and surgery) and the ambiguity of its message. Where Beckman took us into a digital realm, Simnett reminds us that we are meat. Where Beckman shows women breaking free of social strictures, Simnett more fundamentally questions what it means to be a woman.

Simnett describes an udder as a queer object; both breast and phallus. *The Udder* frequently elides cows' mamilla with fingers, noses and lips. The intent, it seems, is to trouble a simplistic equation of body and sex or body and gender. In practice, the film risks supporting what it seeks to debunk, equating 'woman' with the carnal body. Isabel's conversations with her brothers and with a doppelganger of herself are uncomfortably sexual. 'You're ravishing' she tells herself, and describes feeling 'sore and inflamed'. On the cusp of adolescence, her future is presented as a binary – to be kept chaste and clean or to be sullied and sexualised.

Blood is more persuasive in its challenge to gender norms. We see Isabel leaving her family and undergoing an operation to remove her nasal turbinate bones FIG. 5. This is ostensibly to reduce nosebleeds and stomach cramps and references the work of Wilhelm Fliess – an associate of Freud – who believed in a link between the nose and female genitals. The bones return as musical emissaries (two of Isabel's friends dressed in pink sleeping-bags FIG. 6) who sing about whether or not they are needed. The action alternates between a surreal pink recovery room and an Albanian landscape FIG. 7, where Isabel meets Lali, a 'sworn virgin'. Lali is biologically female but – following a tradition established in fifteenth-century Albania – has taken an oath of chastity that has enabled them to live, dress and be accepted as a man.

Isabel's trepidation about surgery suggests uncertainty about becoming an adult woman. The operation alludes both to gender reassignment and the pathologisation of women in the history of psychoanalysis. Although Isabel remains constrained by the expectations of others, *Blood* grants her agency to work through her own questions about self-identity. 'Are you a he or a she?' she asks Lali. 'He,' Lali answers, and then: 'a he and a she [. . .] I am myself'. Isabel appears to flirt with the possibility of becoming a sworn virgin but resolves that 'I don't need to be a man to be free'. *Blood's* message (if such a hypnagogic work can be said to have one) is established in an opening scene when a class of Albanian schoolchildren read English phrases about a woman, caught in the rain, and a man, thirsty in the sun. Isabel ponders that she'd like to be 'part wet and part dry', somewhere in between.

Watching Beckman and Simnett's work consecutively highlights how understandings of sex and gender have shifted over the last thirty years. From an instruction to wear a dress, to more mainstream recognition of non-binary identity, the films question what makes us who we are and who controls this. Language, clothes, behavioural codes, technology and the body all impact on self-identity (or conceptualisations of this) but none alone can encapsulate it entirely.