Barbara Kruger: The Globe Shrinks, 2010

American conceptual artist and puckish provocateur Barbara Kruger offers a swift punch to the bloated gut of contemporary behavioural norms in her new multi-channel video installation open now at Sprüth Magers, Howick Place.

What's black and white and red all over? Some balls-to-the-wall agitprop from Barbara Kruger, that's what. Best known for appropriating black and white mid-century magazine photographs, Kruger juxtaposes glossy iconography with pithy captions inside overlaid red rectangles in her signature white Futura Bold Oblique typeface. The visual formula —mixing the patina of advertising slickness with deadpan epithets like 'I shop therefore I am'—stands to both deconstruct and subvert the language of tabloid consumer culture, raising fraught questions of sexism and consumerism.

Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1945, Kruger had an early career in magazine editorial design, becoming pictures editor at Condé Nast Publications. In the 80s she was a pioneer of clever political feminist art, belonging to the New York Pictures Generation cohort with the likes of Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. In her new large-scale immersive video installation 'The Globe Shrinks, 2010', Kruger is as coolly sardonic as ever. Clocking in at 12 minutes and 44 seconds, the video runs on a loop, mixing scripted spoken statements and textual commentary that darts between the four screens covering each wall of the gallery. Caught in the crossfire of verbal assaults and absurd musings, the viewer is made to navigate the treacherous terrain of everyday interaction in all its kindness and contempt. The handful of disjointed vignettes include an egotistic artist bullshitting with utter conviction "I'm interested in a kind of positive opportunism", light bulb jokes, teeming gatherings of religious fundamentalists, a self-absorbed dingbat driver inspiring road rage and a tale about a talking dog.

Transitions are made with Kruger's familiar slogans, shouting "Shove It", "Believe It", "Doubt It". Exploding media clichés and the feigned pleasantries that make the world go around, she illuminates our own personally held truths and power struggles lurking beneath the surface. Holding a mirror up to the face of mass culture, the picture reflected back at us is poignant, but it sure ain't pretty.

Barbara Kruger 'The Globe Shrinks' at 10-12 Francis Street, London SW1P 1QU from 21st April to 21st May 2011

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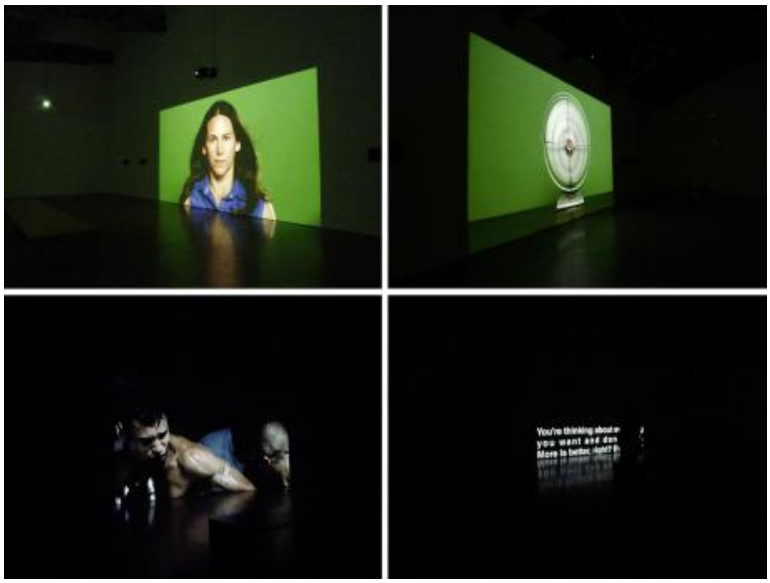
i-D online, 21 April 2011
By Jacqueline Marcus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