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SANTA FE

JANINE ANTONI
SITE SANTA FE

Tightrope acts are anxious spectacles. So it's appropriate that Janine Antoni, a virtuoso of public displays of anxiety, learned to walk the high wire for a video commissioned by SITE Santa Fe for her career survey, “taught tether teeter.” Miming a fearless Ariadne whose brave crossings double as a hero's journey, Antoni, dressed in sky

blue, performs in front of her childhood home in Freeport, Bahamas. The camera angle makes her appear to tread the ocean's horizon. This walk on air and water is a self-parodying pun on the precocious success of the artist, who, at thirty-eight, has been famous since 1992. That was the year of her first show in New York, for which she gnawed a six-hundred-pound block of chocolate and injected herself into the second-wave-feminist artist corps, at once exposing and dissecting cultural appetites.

In *Touch*, 2002, the sun dims and water darkens while the balancing artist displays her concentration. Antoni's longtime reiteration of childhood practices—licking and biting—is present in this daring exhibitionism. Her behavior implies audiences, including adoring parents who watch their progeny set her bar ever higher. But unlike earlier Antoni gallery performances—which were closer in process to works by Marina Abramović or Carolee Schneemann—here she eliminates the possibility of failure. (Teeter though she does, Antoni never falls in the edited video.) Circumventing any smashed-face potential, this piece reveals the distance traveled from feminist performance art's sweaty, leaky, bodily-fluid-exchanging origins to the ready-for-my-close-up aesthetic of the 1990s bad girl. The image of action has usurped the primacy of unmediated action.

The scope of Antoni's show is spare, consisting of only twenty pieces. The juxtapositions of Antoni's *Lick & Lather* busts, 1993, her *Eureka* lard- and soap-loaf installations, 1993, *Tender Buttons* gold nipple castings, 1994, and the wall-inset breast impressions and latex nipples of *Wean*, 1990, underscore Antoni's preoccupation with nature/nurture symbiosis.



Janine Antoni, *Touch*, 2002, video installation.
9 minutes 37 seconds.

Testifying to the artist's consistent references to her own parents in the picture of her success, the show opens with a trio of gender-bent 1994 *Mom and Dad* portraits, in which the couples' faces are altered with prosthetic makeup (Antoni's father is a retired plastic surgeon).

What emerges is that, while remaining true to the history of women's work, Antoni has frequently crossed the line between pacifier and provocateur, faithful Penelope and faithless Circe. The C-prints on view also display the artist's ongoing dialectic between separation anxiety and selfhood proclaiming. In *Momme*, 1995, Antoni hides under her mother's skirts, visible only as a pregnant lump and a stray foot between her mother's feet. In *Coddle*, 1998, the artist gazes dreamily at her own leg, which she cradles in her arms. While the former image appears playful and the latter nearly mournful, Antoni's clear point is that mother inculcates culture, child ingests it, and the relationship transforms insensate brute into artist. As she matures, though, Antoni instead foregrounds her own artistic role as natural birther. This dynamic comes to fruition in the C-print 2038, 2000, showing Antoni bathing in a tub from which a tender-eyed cow drinks. Antoni's adoring-Madonna face beside the cow depicts the artist embodying the transition to nature that is arguably the potent desire of cultural production.

This career survey ultimately points to the artist's procedural consistency: She has always plumbed the psychic closet (and the medicine cabinet) for material. She has *taken in* social views of womanhood and literally spat them back out as symbols of cleansing. And now she offers up herself yet again as beggar metamorphosing into

Phoenix to propose the durability and elasticity of the reconstituted self. Like Beuys, whom she obviously reveres, Antoni is a missionary with an occult gleam.

—Ellen Berkovitch