

All Hysterical

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Delphine Lebourgeois

Press Release

Dating back centuries, hysteria has always been perceived as a predominantly female issue. Ancient Egypt attributed it to a wandering uterus (from which its name derives) and in the Middle Ages right through the Renaissance, Christian beliefs often associated hysteria with satanic possession or witchcraft, leading to thousands of executions.

In the late nineteenth century, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot studied hysteria at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, where he “treated” over one hundred and twenty women. Through dramatic public demonstrations involving hypnosis, Charcot displayed “hysterics” as fabricated performances, surrounding himself with writers, artists and filmmakers to document his research. The spectacular nature of female spasmodic bodies fascinated, and inevitably inspired numerous artists such as Auguste Rodin, Edgar Degas and Toulouse Lautrec. The influence of the “hysterical trend” also appeared in theatres with Jane Avril (who was one of Charcot’s patients) and Sarah Bernhardt.

Even if Charcot (closely followed by Sigmund Freud) acknowledged the existence of male hysteria, his patients were almost all women, subjects more easily exploitable and more aesthetically pleasing for the Salpêtrière’s all male audience.

Today in Western culture, hysteria is disregarded as a medical diagnosis. The term ‘hysterical’ is still tinted with negativity, often referring to a person who is uncontrollably emotional or irrationally upset. Since the 1960s however, many feminists have been looking at hysteria as the first, unconscious attempt to confront patriarchal values, a language women used in an attempt to be heard and noticed.

Delphine Lebourgeois’ new series of works “All Hysterical” is an exploration of phenomena often associated with teenage girls – such as fandoms and conversion disorders – as well as a broader rendition of teenage years in general. Inspired by literature, Beatlemania, K-Pop fans and various accounts of conversion disorders (including multiple cases of Tourette’s syndrome amongst a group of cheerleaders), she depicts adolescence as an age of intensity, mystery and transition, turning “hysteria” into a strength and a super-visionary state. The adolescents are portrayed as forces of nature with a clear sexual undertone, slurping at a tornado as though it were an ice cream, brooding in the crater of an erupting volcano or biting ravenously into a K-pop boy band (consumerism also plays an important part in the K-Pop series)

Despite the ‘out of control’ nature one would expect from hysterical behaviour, most of Lebourgeois’ images are particularly serene. Though she has never shied away from images depicting armies of angry and screaming women, this series is a study of quite the opposite – a paradox considering its subject. Her carefully crafted compositions rather seek to impose a sense of control and calm, so that the so called hysterics instead

appear to master their bodies and minds, a form of strength that, though different, is just as powerful as anger.

In the “All Hysterical” drawings and Cheerleaders series, Lebourgeois borrows a Paul Richer drawing - “Arc de Cercle” - dating back to 1887 and originally published in a book the artist-neurologist co-wrote with Charcot, “Les Démoniaques dans l’Art”. The black and white medical drawing portrays the body of a helpless and distressed woman, arched backwards as though in agony. Lebourgeois turns this notion of vulnerability on its head, subverting its original meaning and purpose in order to transform the otherwise passive body into an active one. Illness turns into a force.

Much like her 2020 series Witches, “All Hysterical” is another account of female repression Lebourgeois explores, plays with, and ultimately dismantles, always with a degree of humour but never downplaying the importance of positioning her female subjects as the true bearers of power.