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CIGDEM AYDEMIR

I won't let you out of my sight

I WON'T LET YOU OUT OF MY SIGHT

Flotation device in hand, a woman runs down the length of a busy beach, her focused expression revealed in slow motion. Water splashes at her feet, and heads turn in her wake, eyes drawn to the her distinctive red bathing suit as she weaves her way through the crowd to the strains of David Hasselhoff singing "I won't let you out of my sight."

*Don't you worry!
It's gonna be alright
'cause I'm always ready,
I won't let you out of my sight.*

*I'll be ready (I'll be ready)
Never you fear (no don't you fear)
I'll be ready
Forever and always
I'm always here.*

The recorded soundtrack blasts from a modified lifesaver float, as prop in hand, Cigdem Aydemir humorously re-enacts the heroic gestures of the popular 1990s television program *Baywatch*. 'Babewatch' as it was colloquially known, became infamous for slow motion montages of sexy lifesavers running the length of the beach, breathing life into the lips of the rescued, and surveying the water - the steady watcher, standing still - checking for trouble, ready for action. Donning a red burqini, a custom-made swimming costume designed for Muslim women, the artist performs these actions at three densely populated Sydney beaches - Bondi, Maroubra and Cronulla. In *I won't let you out of my sight*, we observe the mixed responses of the beach-goers - curious glances, laughter and smiles, bewilderment and confusion. In the installation, we survey these scenes as a panoramic projection onto undulating waves of polyester fabric 'flags' that run the length of the gallery space.

The crowds featured in the video mirror those found in familiar iconic representations of Australian identity; people sunbathing, swimming, playing volleyball and generally enjoying 'the great outdoors'. From Charles Meere's tableau *Australian Beach Pattern* (1940) or Max Dupain's *Sunbaker* (1937) to their re-interpretation by Anne Zahalka in her series *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific* (1989), and many beer commercials in between, the beach is central to the formation of Australian cultural identity as a land 'girt by sea'. But the beaches watched over by Aydemir are also sites where racism and intolerance erupted into public view, in the form of the 'Cronulla Riots' of December 2005.

Disappointingly, the public and political response to the riots remained at the level of appearance, treating the racial conflict as a public relations problem rather than as a societal issue. In denying the racially targeted nature of the violence and characterising the riots as isolated incidents, Australian politicians echoed American President George Bush's description of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots - both the events and their representation - as a distorting mirror:¹ In the case of the Cronulla Riots, the racial tensions emerged amidst declarations of Nationalism, while at the same time being characterised as an aberration from the self-perception of this same identity; in the face of an undeniable appearance that does not match with the perceived reality, the political response appears to be to bury one's head in the sand.

Ten years on from the riots, Aydemir has revisited these sites of conflict, performing a role that appears out of place between the flags. In this work, the artist acts out her positionality and Australian-Muslim identity, framed as 'Other' through dress, in this case the red burqini. Aydemir wore the veil from the ages of ten to twenty, and redraws the figure of the veiled woman in her practice as a commentary and critique of its metonymic function in narratives of Australian national identity, whereby women become 'pawns in addressing broader social-political struggles.'² In the practice more broadly, the veil operates for Aydemir as both a socially constructed site and as a cipher for a resistant female other. The fabric folds of the veil are echoed here in the motif of the 'flag' - a symbol of national identification and in the context of the Australian beach, a marking out of 'safe', patrolled waters. Aydemir activates this space 'between the flags' as a contested territory for the performance of dissent and difference.

In her humorous re-enactment of heroic and sexualised tropes of the surf lifesaver, the artist plays the roles of both the watcher and the watched, questioning relations of power and the gaze and operations of surveillance and agency. In this way Aydemir activates humour as a radical intervention to deal with anger and tension and as a response to her personal experience of these conflicts. Jo Anna Isaak, in the 1982 landmark exhibition and subsequent book *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, addresses the potential empowerment of humour in art as a strategy for feminist critique.³ As Jayne Wark argues, the aim of such humour, is not to 'soften the political point in order to make it more palatable and less offensive' but to 'soften up the audience.'⁴ In response to Aydemir's *I won't let you out of my sight*, we might laugh as the artist awkwardly crawls from the sea or stands vigil while submerged up to her neck in the sand. However, this laughter is also discomfiting, and close to home, as Aydemir manifests these moments of failure as visible acts of resistance.

- Rachael Haynes and Christopher Handran

1. Margaret Morse 1998 *Virtualities*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 44.

2. Cigdem Aydemir, artist statement, 2015

3. Jo Anna Isaak 1996 *Feminism and Contemporary Art: the Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. London and New York, Routledge.

4. Jayne Wark 2006 *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. Montreal and London: McGill Queen's University Press, 204.



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