

Put on a Happy Face

On Dynasty Handbag

Remember last November? Remember when yesterday's nightmare became today's reality, and those first jolts of post-election high alert crystalized into an ongoing state of alarm? It's no accident that the first cultural happening I managed to see in our new illiberal era was something called *Weirdo Night* at El Cid, a monthly comedy and performance intervention run by Dynasty Handbag (née Jibz Cameron). As digital hygiene took precedence over personal, it felt good and safe to subject my body to a few stiff drinks and some incisively physical comedy. Still, it was tough to confront even a sendup of the current social id. One guest, Jason Black, performed a discomfiting satire of a "downtown" bro-comedian, plunking down too-soon material, like, to wit: "I don't hate Hillary Clinton because she's a woman. I hate her because she's a bitch." He's fucking with us, I said—he's fucking with us. "That doesn't make it funny," said my friend. Sure enough, the "comic" got roundly heckled off stage by conceptual wrestler Candy Pain (Mikki Olson), who then cancelled Black's limp parody with an act of her own: a germane diatribe against white men with microphones. By the time she drew a balloon labeled PATRIARCHY from a giant bag of candy and popped it with her thighs, the whole room felt a little lighter.

But it was Dynasty Handbag who sent the crowd, somewhat

recharged, back into the bitterly disfigured landscape, with a video of her own: a makeup tutorial for life under fascist rule. First, the eyes: "Start with a placid, American, pastoral, beautiful, national parks, lake blue—" Green mountains arching under her eyebrows, sunshine yellow above. To "accent things a little bit," Dynasty jabs at her tear ducts with black—"just covering our landscape with doom, capitalism, white supremacy..." then smudges it to shit. It looks like she's been punched in the face. (How does the joke go? "You look like I feel...") Two minutes later she's completed shame-pink cheeks, a Jokerish red mouth, and, because we'll all lose our healthcare soon, two blacked out front teeth. "It's the same great taste but a whole new look," she sings, keeping it light. Cut to black, beat, then back: Dynasty's still singing, but her face is worry-lined, her eyes dart: "It's a new thing, but it's an old thing..."

True, things are always already kind of mussed under heteronormative neocapitalist patriarchy, and Dynasty's makeup isn't usually all that different. Her wardrobe, too, is a silent scream: heavy on bowler hats, taupe Spanx, fashion leotards, and thrifted silk suits with the tags still on. Even on a good day, her solo routines lurch from slice-of-life monologues into violent interpretive dance; harangues on nut milks and jars; and lip syncing Black Sabbath. All is laced with sub-linguistic outbursts that embody then expel the bullshit and stress of modern intellectual life, without losing sight of the fact that these very real anxieties are accouterments of her bubble—whiteness, artness, even big-city queerness—and, by

Travis Diehl is a recipient of the Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. He lives in Los Angeles.



extension, ours. Dynasty's overarching joke hangs on the double-bind of high culture: capitalist exploitation on the one hand, and anti-capitalist complacency on the other. The punch line is that these self-made communities, these nights of avant-comedy included, just might keep us sane. Especially now that a bigoted insult comic has the world's most powerful mic.

There's a reason those New Age folks say *be here now*. Look at the alternatives: depression lies behind, anxiety ahead. But the present has its problems, too. In her video *The Quiet Storm* (2007) with Hedia Maron, just walking down to the deli for a sandwich reminds Dynasty of her paralyzing inadequacy, and leads her to take a desperate vow of silence. The show must go on—and it will—but in the meantime, our struggle is real against a self-trolling inner monologue. Another day begins in an air thick with panic. The *now* is the center of the anxious-depressive knot.

And what could be more *now* than the news? Dynasty's evening-length performance *Good Morning Evening Feelings* (2015) takes the format of a morning talk show—the sort of lite fare pitched at viewers presumed to be half asleep—and hurtles it at a self-flagellating audience content with being Woke. In lieu of pet tricks and gossip, the show is structured by fear, anger, guilt, and shame—what Dynasty calls F.A.G.S. After making smoothies of fearful memories and interviewing Womanhood herself, Dynasty confronts shame (a collective, human, environmental shame) with a skit called “Flaming Headlines.” She unfurls a newspaper (print! trees!) and delivers her hot takes. The hole in the ozone layer should be filled; the stock market is up, and that's good. But her inner critic (in booming voiceover) won't let her be smug for

long, mocking her hairspray, daring her to define what a stock even is. The sketch plummets into a big band swing number about how today is the day to feel bad, tomorrow is the day to feel worse. Dynasty cowers behind her paper.

Oh yeah, remember the environment? Dynasty takes more than one jab at those of us who think activism means flushing our toilets only once a day. As her routines move past grammar and sense, Dynasty performs a crazy quilt response to unacceptable circumstances, shaming the rational costume of narcissists in both jumpers and suits. But who are those news-people kidding? We're all fucked, even those doing the fucking, even if they don't know it yet. Meanwhile, there's the power of a joke to snatch a good breath from a poisonous atmosphere. Meanwhile, there's comedy to frame up the clownish, even vaudeville tactics of power.

The mask of self-righteous reality-denial apparently works well enough. A joke can parry a hard question (“there you go again”) or turn a dog-whistle into doublespeak.¹ But to step beyond rhetoric is to risk failure. Failure to change, failure to win, failure of equality and justice and truth; failure to take care of our planet; failure of democracy and direct action (at least for *now*). Then there are the more individuated failures—career, project, chitchat, to-do list, or simply a life in the arts—which feel all the more crushing because they're our own damn fault. Dynasty's act makes fun of failure, personal and collective alike; she's made lemonade out of at least one failed attempt to break into TV, for instance (but let's hope the next one succeeds).² She's up there rehearsing her own foibles and insecurities in ways that we might relate to, or at least laugh with, and suddenly, for those few seconds, we

1. See Emily Nussbaum, “How Jokes Won the Election,” *The New Yorker*, Jan. 23, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>.

2. See Jibz Cameron and Hedia Maron, “The Dynasty Handbag Show,” *Triple Canopy's Internet as Material*, 2013, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the_dynasty_handbag_show.



drop out of our own inward spirals of depression and anxiety, let failure rest in the past, and land on the much wider vista of *now*.

But now, more than ever, there is no escape. Not from each other, and not from ourselves. “The Age of Humanism is Ending,” says one of my browser tabs.³ In another is a video of Dynasty Handbag doing the “Vague”—all feather dusters and bad lace; Madonna it ain’t. “Am I historical or hysterical?” she asks, in a kind of mumbling coda. So much for the slick copping of a queer subculture. Performance, in Dynasty Handbag’s hands, is a tour de force not of orthogonal moves but of wagging arms and scrunched faces. She makes a manic virtue of uncertainty, and gives us hope of overcoming a basic fear of being—if not stupid, then at least silly, or at least human. There are those public figures who won’t be caught looking ridiculous, and those who will never admit that they’re fools. For the rest of us, there’s Dynasty Handbag, sounding the alarm.

1

Dynasty Handbag, Cruising the Meatrack in Fire Island. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Allison Michael Orenstein.

2

Dynasty Handbag, *I Never Were Again, A Concert* at Gibney Dance Center, NY (2015) (performance still). Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Scott Shaw.

3

Dynasty Handbag, *Soggy Glasses* at BAM, NY (2014) (performance still). Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Alex Escalante.

4

Dynasty Handbag, *I, An Moron* (2016) (performance still). Image courtesy of the Hammer Museum. Photo: Todd Cheney.

3. See Mbembe, Achille. “The Age of Humanism is Ending,” <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-12-22-00-the-age-of-humanism-is-ending>. *The Mail & Guardian*, 2016. Web.

