

Green Fingered: Seed Series

Gemma Marmalade

The Awkwardness and Comedy of Difference

Gemma Marmalade works within the deadpan comic tradition that can often involve a straight delivery in relation to absurd and extraordinary situations. In *Green Fingered: Seed Series* she presents an archive of purportedly historical black and white photographs, each showing women of differing ages and the over-size vegetables we assume they have grown.

The photographs are given an incredible back story and context – according to research by German botanist Dr Gerda Haeckel, the accelerated crop growth observed among communal lesbian gardeners throughout the 1970s and 1980s is down to the unique pheromones the women transmit to their plants. Such a reference carries allusions to the work of medical science in trying to identify genetic traits in relation to sexual orientation. There is also the unsettling implication of thinking about the women's sexuality as akin to their over-size crops, in terms of a deviation and aberration from a norm.

Much philosophical reflection on humour proposes it is produced through the experience of a disjuncture between what we know or expect to be the case and what takes place in the joke. Incongruity makes us laugh, since it breaks what Simon Critchley has referred to as 'the bond connecting the human being to its unreflective, everyday existence'. Jokes have a habit of disrupting everyday life, breaking the routine. In comedy the ordinary world is looked at awry and as a result made unfamiliar.

In Gemma's photographs the comic incongruity is provided by the visual joke of over-sized vegetables. The women who appear in her portraits all manage to keep straight faces and there is a clear contrast between their look and the vegetables they hold. This comic duality gives us a kind of double act, with these serious women and their comic crops.

The vegetable or fruit as sexual innuendo is a long-standing comic gag and Gemma re-plays this joke in *Green Fingered*, not simply

through the big cucumber, but in the portrait of a woman holding a huge leek and the way the strands of its roots appear to create a merkin over her crotch. Gemma's art can be seen to take its cue from Sarah Lucas' sculptural readymade improvisations, often involving innuendos with fruit and vegetables in response to the crude and sexist language used to describe the female body. Both artists are skilled at making blunt and direct art in response to the potential comedy associated with sex, sexuality and the body. Only Gemma is coming at such a subject from a different sexual perspective.

The comic body is exaggeratedly physical. Part of the comedy of these pictures of over-size vegetables is the way they rebound back on the human body. The women are all clothed, dressed in the garb appropriate to those who have worked on the land. The vegetables nevertheless, through innuendo or their unruly physical shapes, make us think of the human body and its various sizes and proportions.

The comedy of Martin Parr's recent portraits of old men, holding their prizewinning vegetables, from his *Black Country Stories* (2010-2014), rests upon the way the big onions or leeks disrupt the straight pose and relative in-expressivity of those who hold them. The pictures are less choreographed than Gemma's and have a blind faith in the enduring interest and value of the photographic document in showing us the social mores and behaviour of certain people at a certain time. On the look out for differences and oddities in the day-to-day, Parr's funny vegetable pictures in many respects can be seen to epitomise his aesthetic.

Certainly what we are dealing with in Gemma's work is difference and the awkwardness and comedy of difference. Jokes are often said to be universal, yet they are really very particular and local, they depend upon shared values, what one group has in common. Jokes are, as Freud has said, linked to the unconscious. Repressed thoughts can manifest themselves in jokes. This is why

comedy can be a difficult and uneasy form to use in art. Laughter can be cruel and divisive. Deadpan or dry humour involves a reflection back upon comedy itself; it is a more self-aware comic form. As a result it brings greater unease and uncertainty about how we are to respond, makes us unsure about what we should laugh at or if we should be laughing at all.

The twist Gemma gives to the well-trodden joke of funny-looking vegetables is the way she spins out a tale to do with an association between the fecundity and excess of the crops and the women's sexuality. While the absurdity of the science is clearly mocked, Gemma's series involves a witty assertion of the freedoms from the norm, of being different. In this respect the joke of this work is subversive, one of liberation and celebration, a challenge to univocal interpretations and an exposé of the ridiculousness of certain prejudicial assumptions.

Mark Durden



Pod and Pumpkin



Lisa and Leek



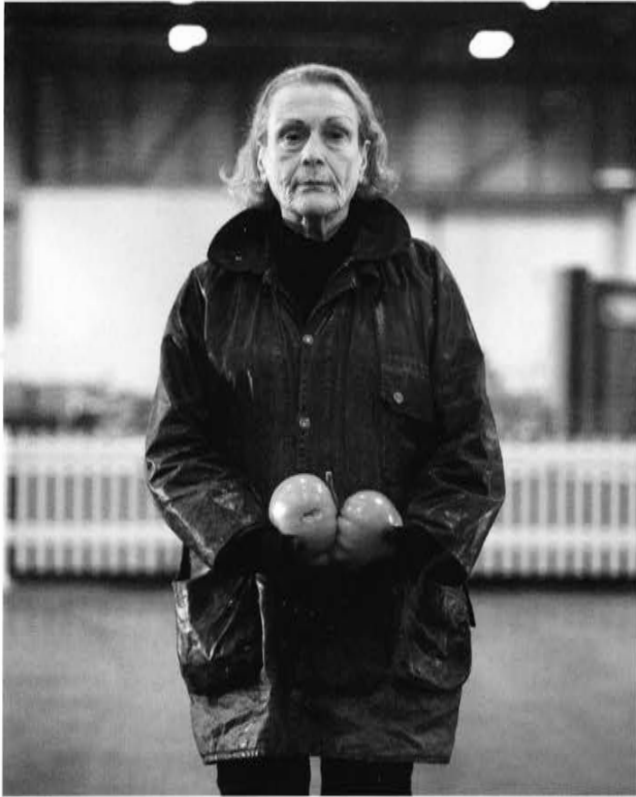
Gemma and Cabbage



Amanda and Cucumber



Laura, Emma and Swede



Moira and Tomato



Mel and Marrow



Marie and Onion