

Art

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Oliver Ressler

Interviewed by Colin Perry

The Art Right

Larne Abse Gogarty

Women's Work

Maria Walsh

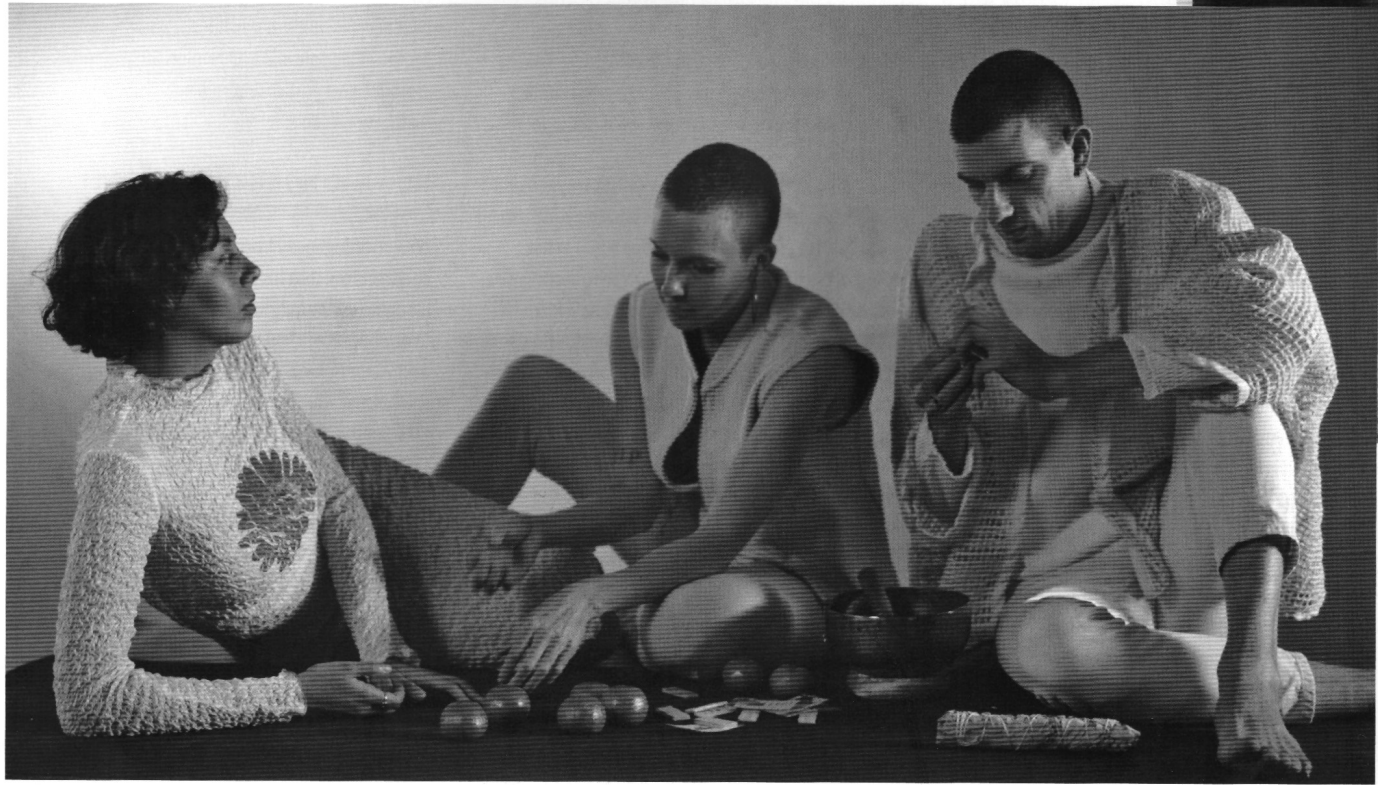
Jenna Bliss

Profile by Tim Steer

Jenna Bliss

TIM STEER

The New York-based artist examines addiction, detox and recovery in life and art.



It was not until 1909 that individuals became defined as 'addicts'. This coincided – in the US at least – with new laws introduced to make narcotics illegal. These were further expanded in 1914 by the Harrison Anti-Narcotics Act, which prohibited physicians from treating or prescribing any maintenance drugs and patients from being able to legally source drugs safely. Overnight, drug dependency became pathologised as an 'addiction' and an 'addict' had become defined as a criminal. In her essay 'Epidemics of the Will', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick appropriates Michel Foucault's analysis of homosexuality to describe the process: 'As defined by [early 19th-century norms], [opium-eating] was a category of ... acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The 19th-century [addict] became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood ... [His addiction] was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away

... The [opium-eater] had been a temporary aberration; the [addict] was now a species.' How, then, to parse the complexities of addiction from the bodies of individualised subjects to the master state apparatuses that administer and enable big pharma and the global drug trade?

We watch a tight close-up of a young shaven-headed girl and male figure in a leather jacket, framed by smoke, swinging an orange-coloured corrugated tube. The tube or cabling is being wrapped around the girl's arms, which are now more or less immobilised. There are sounds of deep inhalations and exhalations, gasps of breath and the mouthing of smoke being aired out. In a voice-over, the poet Gil Fagiani (and founding member of Bronx activist group *Spirit of LOGOS* and its later incarnation, *White Lightning*) recites 'Shooting Dope With Trotsky' – describing his friends buying Trotskyite newspapers and sitting in NYU bathrooms shooting up 'bags of scag'. As Fagiani speaks of 'nod[ding] off to the lullaby of the ABC of Materialist Dialectics / the negation of the negation of the negation', the ribbed and artery-coloured

tubing is more closely wrapped around their limbs. The positions of man and girl have been reversed as she now wraps the cabling over and around his arms. Ekstasis is tattooed on his chest. Gentle breaths and a slight burning crackle can be heard throughout. Then we cut to a similar smoke-filled room, where the plastic tubes are being swung by leather-outfitted figures wearing gas masks. The sound of the swinging is threatening, as though the ropes are of heavy leather, and disorientating, as they are out of sync with the circular movements.

These languid and atmospheric scenes serve as the introduction for New York-based artist Jenna Bliss's *History of Lincoln Detox 1970-1979*, 2016-. The video is an assemblage of newspaper articles, personal interviews, archive material, posters and other accounts of the activities surrounding 'Lincoln Detox'. By 1970, one in four people in the South Bronx were addicted to heroin. Lincoln Detox was a recovery centre established by the Young Lords and other local groups that began occupying a former hospital and using it as a radical health clinic to treat addiction. The video outlines through different historical material and interviews how the state was wholly inadequate in addressing the issue of addiction and, in some circumstances, complicit in propagating its activities. In response, community groups began experimenting and self-medicating with holistic practices such as auricular therapy after reading about the effectiveness of acupuncture as a potential treatment for opiate addiction from a *New York Times* article. This led to the protocol administered to the South Bronx locals at Lincoln Detox.

History of Lincoln Detox 1970-1979 is an account of resistance – it documents the rent strikes, demonstrations, defence committees,



opposite
*Into This Recovery:
A History of Lincoln
Detox 2015*- video

left and below
Poison The Cure
2017 video



information dissemination and community activities. It renders visible and human a population that is avoided, misrecognised and stigmatised, but also brings valuable attention to an underrepresented and overlooked historical moment in which groups resisted the politically structured suffering imposed on them and began experimenting with alternative forms of care and community. It moves between the syntax of a documentary film, archive and artistic restaging. It is a slippery and self-referential approach to documentary material, addressing the fraught but relatively stable history of drug addiction, big pharma and government complicity through poetry, artistic representation and fiction.

Following the video interviews and historical accounts of the origin and practices of Lincoln Detox, another framing scene shows three young figures (representing addicts) experimenting with holistic therapy both on oranges and on themselves. Two women and a man, now barefoot and dressed in natural white fabrics, lounge on a blue carpeted floor, slowly pressing acupuncture needles into

oranges and holding each other's limbs. It is a sort of romanticised but self-consciously staged and performed representation of the Lincoln Detox treatment. Through its artistic restaging, the video approaches the complex political, social and historical material more like that of an individual relating information. Bliss's own subjectivity can be felt, and this intersubjective mode works on an audience at the level of personal communication and response.

Into This Recovery Center, introduced at South London Gallery in 2015, also works according to this agenda – enacting a shared experience of performing holistic practices by the audience in response to a presentation of South Bronx's addiction history. The performance evening introduced a documentary presentation of Lincoln Detox by Bliss, followed by audience members performing Reiki on each other under a low bass soundtrack and healing hued lights.

Presenting subjectivity, representing a subject position or a voice is a connecting thread across Bliss's other work. *Letters*, 2013, appropriates a form (like that of Paul

B Preciado or one of her video dedicatees, Chris Kraus) that responds to different political, emotional and historical material through a presentation of her subjectivity or self directly into the content she is showing. *Letters* is a series of five videos based on unsent letters ('Dear Dad The Analyst', 'A Letter to Osama Bin Laden', 'For Chris Kraus', 'Dear Carlos the Jackal' and 'To you, Grandma') that were developed while the Occupy movement in New York began and Bliss was still based in the UK. In 'A Letter to Osama Bin Laden', for example, Bliss breaks form from the careful and measured voice-over and accompanying video to reveal herself in a studio behind a microphone speaking a script, self-referentially repeating phrases before dropping her head in her hand in response to her own performance.

Poison The Cure, 2017, Bliss's latest film commission builds on the techno-hormono-pharmacological (borrowing Preciado's term) analysis in *History of Lincoln Detox 1970-1979* but develops a body of research into a scripted 30-minute film that is based on the lived experience of pharmacology under capitalism. It self-consciously plays with its authenticity or any claims to objective historical accuracy by undermining both its period and context. The scenes are split across two loosely historical locations. The first is set in a conflation of modern-day New York and 18th-century British Romanticism and follows the relationship between an unemployed Puerto Rican factory man and his opium-addicted landlord. The second relays a script featuring two women in a Rio Piedres suburb, set in 1956 when the first clinical trials of the birth-control pill took place (a mass experiment known for the controversial exploitation of its trial subjects). Here, again, the account is a self-consciously fictionalised presentation, but its personal and communal register still leaves room for resistance and protest. And, at a time when gendered and migrant bodies are the stage for state narratives and political debate, Bliss's analysis of the addicted body, its political history and group resistance offers an artistic practice that advocates care, testimony and communal action. ■

Poison The Cure will be on show at Raven Row, London, as part of '56 Artillery Lane' from 21 April to 11 June.

TIM STEER is a curator and writer based in London.