

Art issues.

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Hilja Keading

at TRI, 18 February–12 March

At first glance, Hilja Keading's video installation and photographic collages seem to be full of wonder and humor. The circus tricks and balloons she pictures retain the fascination they once held in childhood. But under pressure of the video's sound track—one suspenseful note, the kind used to signal impending action in the movies—wonder gives way to familiar irony. Any event would be a let-down following the sentimentality of that one climactic note extended for so long. This irony, too, in turn gives way: The viewer cannot rebound from the dark side of the apparent humor, and is drawn into genuine despair.

The circus mirrors the world by turning everyday life upside-down, exaggerating and picking fun at it. Keading takes the circus' melodrama and returns it back to daily life. In her collages, she accomplishes this by using materials of the home; snapshots and postcards hung with tape and thumbtacks make her installation deceptively unassuming. Children are the actors in much of Keading's circus work. Our desire to see childhood nostalgically is checked by her images of children on trial: Photographed from a TV screen, the children in *Liar* (1994) and *Did Not* (1993-95) stand in front of a microphone, as the viewer witnesses their silence in response to the voices that seem to interrogate them. In *Liar*, wooden letters spelling out the work's title rest on a tiny shelf next to the snapshot. The diminutiveness of the form is misleading: The dialogue set up between image and text resonates, the weight of the word coming as a shock. In *Not You* (1994), two pink circus postcards and two blurred snapshots taken from a video monitor are taped together. The angry scrawl "GOD MADE IT NOT YOU" seems incongruous under the postcard's image of a happy child dressed in a clown suit. The text reprimands both the child and the viewer at once.

In *As If* (1993-95), by contrast, the image of a child as subject is replaced by a text written in a childlike manner. Among black-and-white photos of the circus, wandering words express the desire to escape "...the big big church, the church that goes

way up to the sky, the church that makes me sick." Church and circus are equated as sites of oppression. The text's brief mention of sky is a welcome relief from the psychological shadows and staged darkness of the photographs. In Keading's two-channel video *180°* (1995), the left monitor slowly reveals a list of no's: "no yesterday, no sorry, no should, no pencil, no pointing." Intercut with the list is a male circus performer doing tricks with hoola-hoops. Meanwhile, on the right monitor, a young circus girl performs and poses, intercut with the same list of no's. These are images of in-between moments and awkward interactions; the footage operates as a surrogate view of a family drama. The text is desperate and introverted, and the voice of authority is mixed with the darkness of childhood.

Keading's work balances on a line between cliché and lived experience. It operates within the imagery of mass media—as sensational as self-help books or tabloid covers—yet catches you off-guard as personally compelling testimony. The schizophrenic child/adult voice of Keading's text, and her view of the circus as both pleasurable and as an analytic metaphor allows this shift to take place. The relentless negativity reflects the despair of childhood: Time has no scale. It is stuck, frozen, endlessly repeating, forming a fabric so large that there is no seeing past the moment. The childish perspective and our empathy with it undermines an ironic or sarcastic reading of Keading's art. Like a smile masking an intention to bite, she lures us with fun. We approach the images by rote, as if they were simply curious or harmlessly ironic, and then are confronted with a desolate view of a vicious world.

Ingrid Calame is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles.



Hilja Keading
Did Not, 1993-95
Photographs, tacks, and tape
29" x 29"