

Space Invader

Swiss artist Zilla Leutenegger stretches video images onto the wall and across the floor

BY MARC SPIEGLER

Her soft voice suddenly taking on an iron timbre, Zurich artist Zilla Leutenegger wants to make one thing clear: "I am really tired of people saying I am like Tracey Emin." A few too many critics, it seems, have extrapolated from the fact that both women deploy several mediums and star in their own work. Beyond this, however, the comparison crumples. "I admire the way Tracey never compromises in her art," Leutenegger says. "But my work is not her sort of soul striptease. The only reason I use myself on-screen is because I don't like communicating what I want done to someone else."

In the video component of *Lessons I Learned from Rocky I to Rocky III* (2002), for example, Leutenegger wears a sweater with two loose yarn strings dangling from the middle of red areolae knitted into the fabric. She pulls on the strings constantly, transmogrifying her chest from saggy to pert to pneumatic. "To me this is a universal thing for women, imagining what you would look like with different breasts," Leutenegger explains. "It's not about my personal feelings." Pushing the piece beyond two dimensions, the yarn strands run off the bottom of the screen and then reappear, materially, extending across a floor mirror toward the viewer.

Curator Charlotte Mailler, who selected the piece for the current Prague Biennial, says, "What's interesting about Zilla is how she adds these elements that push the art beyond classic video." Working site-specifically, Leutenegger has repeatedly stretched images across multiple planes. In *Zipcode* (2001), a glimmering figure slumps in a corner, murmuring to a friend on the phone in pseudo-Japanese; taped to the wall above her is a scarcely sketched woman in her underwear. Projected to match the image, the work spans two walls, one corner, and the floor. When it was shown this summer at Liverpool's FACT space, a series of sketches taped to an adjoining wall completed the installation. "Zilla knit together all these various components beautifully, into a single fluid sentence," says FACT curator Cecilia Andersson.

In person, Leutenegger, 35, is slight, almost elfin, with the shy posture typical of indie-rock girls. Before deciding to go to art school, she worked five years as a fashion buyer (she had studied textile design). Today, Leutenegger's personal style is idiosyncratic—futurist meets feminine.

Although Swiss art students rarely have gallery shows before graduating, Leutenegger joined Zurich's prominent Galerie Peter Kilchmann in 1998, while still studying at the city's Academy for Art and Design. Today, Kilchmann remains her primary gallerist, though she also shows in Switzerland with Basel's Galerie Stampa. In the

last year, her international profile has risen, with museum selections and solo shows at Spencer Brownstone Gallery in New York, Galerie Joanna Kamm in Berlin, and Milan's Studio Massimo De Carlo. Prices range from \$1,000 for drawings to \$25,000 for videos.

Though her work pulsates with spontaneity, Leutenegger also leans heavily on digital editing to nail its wildly varied looks, working with programmer Noe Marti on a turbo-powered Silicon Graphics machine. In *Oh Mein Papa* (2001)—in which a forklift carries her draped across its huge tines through a quarry, slumped in a polka-dot night-shirt like an exhausted child, and gently deposits her into a bulldozer's metal maw—the bewitching image is manipulated to the brink of abstraction, stripped of almost all color, with a dozen frames per second removed to give it a jagged edge. For the 2003 video *Liz Maili*, highly popular at

Brownstone's Liste Fair booth in Basel in June, the image of her simply knitting is reduced to the starkest figurative lines. But its brightness is so amped up that the image seems an apparition, glowing with radioactive intensity even in daylight.

Leutenegger's work often has such a fairy-tale feel to it. She has cast herself five times as a visitor to the moon. When she was young, her father spent a year working at NASA, she explains. "I told my friends that he was the man in the moon. Now, when I use the moon in my pieces, I have this double feeling—of being homesick but also of having my own planet." ■

Marc Spiegler, the Zurich correspondent of ARTnews, last wrote for the magazine about Santiago Sierra.



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Video still from *Lessons I Learned from Rocky I to Rocky III*, 2002.