

## Parasol unit

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Review: *I Know Something About Love at Parasol Unit*, Tiffany Jow, [www.artreview.com](http://www.artreview.com), 21 April 2011



## I Know Something About Love at Parasol Unit

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By Tiffany Jow

'If there is a word that leaves no one on this planet indifferent, it is the word love. Perhaps that is because love is the only human emotion that requires confirmation of one's own feelings.' This from the introductory wall text of Parasol Unit's current group exhibition, *I Know Something About Love* (which borrows its title from the 1962 doo-wop hit *Tell Him*, by the Exciters). So informed, one anticipates that this exhibition of sculpture, video and installation will explore a decorated parade of romantic ideals. Instead, artists Yinka Shonibare, Yang Fudong, Shirin Neshat and Christodoulos Panayiotou find that *l'amour* exists in a rather grim reality, one that is created, at least in part, by societal restraints in different cultures that prevent love from flourishing in art or life. Further grounding the show, and finishing off any airy romantic fantasy, is the fact that the works draw quite strongly on the personal experience of its artists – experiences which all seem to be concluded in a sombre acceptance that civilisation ultimately bestows limitations on passion.



Shirin Neshat, *Fervor*, 2000

Two-channel black and white video/audio installation  
Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York © the artist

Originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly, Shonibare's *Jardin d'Amour* (2007) sets the stage via a French rococo-inspired maze of ivy-clad trellis, which has been reconfigured for Parasol Unit's ground floor.

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Navigating dead ends and secret walkways, viewers mimic the act of looking for a lover while proceeding to the artist's lifesize mannequins hidden within the whimsical installation: *The Confession* (2007), *The Pursuit* (2007) and *The Crowning* (2007). Surrounded by sprays of artificial silk flowers, each sculpture depicts a couple dressed in elaborate eighteenth-century costume, sewn of patterned Dutch wax-printed cotton textiles. The artist borrowed and recreated the positions these headless sculptures find themselves in from the mannerisms depicted in the work of eighteenth-century painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The UK-born Shonibare spent his childhood in Nigeria and returned to London in the early 1980s, when he began to explore Western art history using non-Western aesthetics and materials. The success of this approach, as exemplified in *Jardin*, lies in the dual significance of the work and the sexual politics that infuse it. Clad in an arresting juxtaposition of Victorian garb made of fabric inspired by African prints, the sculptures sit strangely in their gendered poses and the garden of Western flora. Presented in this way, the works develop the gender stereotypes manifest in Fragonard's paintings, revealing the anxieties and problematic expectations traditional courtship demands.

In his three-channel video *Flutter, Flutter... Jasmine, Jasmine* (2002), Yang Fudong documents a young Chinese couple who, as they grapple with the paradox of respecting cultural traditions in modern life, express reservations about their new relationship. Shot portrait-style from the shoulders up, the lovers individually confess to the camera their fears and desires for love in their native language. At the end of their confession, they sing lines from the titular Chinese ballad, *Tianshang Tianshang, Moli Moli*, the clichéd lyrics recited in untrained voices making for an awkward, adolescent – but heartfelt – performance. Concurrently, a third screen shows scenes of the couple gazing dreamily into space while lying in bed, walking aimlessly around the city or standing on a balcony, a grey sky gathering in the background. The artist, who is known for his cultural critique of the ever-transforming contemporary China, portrays the lovers as fragile and naive in their expectation that love will save them from both their world and their problems. Psychologically dense yet beautifully executed, Fudong's narrative unfurls in a graceful, organic manner, contrasting views of the couple with shots of dark skies and delicate, brightly coloured flora, which stand as alternating symbols of impending demise and hope amid their union.

Similarly, Shirin Neshat depicts a momentary love conceived in and enforced by postrevolutionary Iran in her dual-screen black-and-white film *Fervor* (2000). Seen through a female protagonist's eyes, her gender's cultural suffocation and dissatisfaction is illustrated in the woman's utter isolation from the opposite sex and inability to return the male gaze. She walks alone along desolate dirt roads, passing a single male from whom she reluctantly averts her eyes. Her all-black costume stands in stark contrast to a consistently light environment, underlining the insignificance and isolation of her gender. The work by the New York-based Neshat, who was born in Iran, gives rise to the notion that cultural limitations not only affect the interaction between men and women, but also threaten to influence their ability to form emotions.

An aesthetically low-fi video of a 24-hour endurance test examines the social construction of love in Christodoulos Panayiotou's *Slow Dance Marathon* (2005). One teenage couple at a time sways to a loop of mawkish classic love songs on a makeshift stage, clumsily holding each other in dishevelled street clothes. When they can go on no longer, one partner leaves in fatigue, only to be replaced by another stranger, forming a chain of dancers that neatly nods to the revolving door of dating relationships. For the Cyprus-born Panayiotou, playing with different angles of perception in his representation of space often leads him to digitally remove the background from his work entirely, leaving his central subjects to exist in a barren non-space. Consequently, his subjects become the essence of the work and are developed into characters with feelings, life stories and potent interior monologues, but devoid of the baggage of cultural and social backdrop.

While the gesture of investigating romantic relations within a variety of contemporary cultural contexts is noble, the artists' all-too-comfortable resignation to their frustrations, paired with the lack of compulsion to propose resolutions, speaks volumes louder than their essentially unremarkable use of multimedia. It is unfortunate that the introduction to the exhibition is partially misleading, in the manner that it implies a poetic showcase of confident, profound expressions of heartfelt romance. Perhaps, however, this is the point: the curation willingly releases its grasp on the hopeful guise established at its beginning, leaving viewers to grapple with perhaps the bitterest symbolism of all.

*I Know Something About Love* is on view at *Parasol Unit*, London until 21 May