

## Jesper Just

GALERIE PERROTIN, Paris

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Singing, dancing, crying, hugging—there has been much discussion over the past decade about how Jesper Just's films critique codes of masculinity (particularly those established by Hollywood) by showing men doing “unmanly” things. In a hiatus from his androcentric—if critically so—worldview, the three films currently showing at Galerie Perrotin feature female protagonists and confront constructs of femininity. Though the focus of *A Vicious Undertow* (2007), *Sirens of Chrome* (2010), and *Llano* (2012) is shifted onto women, the films' surreal settings, lack of dialogue, moody scores, and emotionally ambiguous relationships are classic Just (who reprises his signature male-dominated motifs in the Danish Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale).

Shot in black-and-white 16mm film, *A Vicious Undertow* tackles old Hollywood glamour ideals and pre-code innuendo. Set in an oriental-themed bar, the film opens to a Muzak version of The Moody Blues's *Knights in White Satin* (1967). A lone woman (Benedikte Hansen, who appears in multiple Just films) is introduced from behind, with her blonde chignon, delicate gold chain, and silky dress as the embodiment of film noir feminine mystique. When her face is finally revealed, we see that her puckered lips are responsible for the melancholy soundtrack. Soon a harmonizing whistle joins hers and a second woman, a younger brunette, magically appears. The women engage in an erotic flirtation—eyeing each other while touching themselves suggestively. But their performance is clearly for the viewer's pleasure. During a Bergman-esque montage of dislocated lips, eyes, and hands, suddenly a man's stubbly jaw appears. The presence of Johannes Lilleøre (also a Just regular) reinstates the “male gaze” and complicates the Sapphic courtship. After a dizzying waltz sequence in which the camera follows a seamless rotation of alternating partners, the blonde finds herself alone as the younger pair embraces. Visibly upset she turns away and is suddenly on the famous spiral staircase spire of Copenhagen's Church of Our Savior. Just's focus on the scorned woman's lace stockings and spike heels as she makes her dramatic flight calls further attention to the fetishistic fragmentation of the female body in film.

Made three years later, *Sirens of Chrome* is a more deeply emotional, though equally stylized, evocation of female bonding. In this film, four women cruise through the eerily vacant streets of Detroit in a black Chrysler with an errant purple door. Though they ride together in the car, each woman appears lost in her own thoughts. The group remains silent even when a red sedan—the only other sign of life—appears before of them. Like a siren luring sailors onto the rocks, the red car leads the black car to the top of an above-ground garage. Here the women are treated to an erotic dance when the red car's driver hurls herself onto their hood and begins writhing and gyrating to a thumping trance beat. The women inside appear initially stunned, but soon the ecstatic thrashing rouses them to reach up and meet the dancer's sensual caresses on the opposite side of the window. Then, almost as abruptly as she began her performance, the woman dismounts and retreats. Silently, one by one, the women exit the car and follow her. As the newly bonded clique escapes into the distance, the viewer is left to contemplate this seemingly post-apocalyptic sexual awakening from behind the windshield.

Just's most recent film, *Llano*, which premiered at James Cohan Gallery in New York this past fall, is the least narrative of the trio and features the most enigmatic female character. Titled after the Mojave Desert ghost town (Llano del Rio) where it was filmed, *Llano* depicts an obese woman ineffectively toiling to repair a vestigial stone wall while being pelted with sheets of artificial rain spewing from a movie-set sprinkler system. With her oversized tie-dye T-shirt clinging to her rotund frame and stringy clumps of hair hanging in her face, she is far from what one would consider a seductress. Mirroring the failed utopia she struggles to rebuild (Llano was founded as a socialist colony in 1913, but abandoned five years later due to insufficient water supply), she seems to represent femininity in ruin, at least in terms of Hollywood aesthetics. Creating a foil to the hyper-sexualized females in the other two films, Just underscores the troubling image of this burly, slogging woman by locating her not in a Chrysler or



1 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.



2 Jesper Just, *A Vicious Undertow*, 2007.



3 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.



4 Jesper Just, *Sirens of Chrome*, 2010.



5 Jesper Just, *Llano*, 2012.



6 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.

a cocktail bar, but in the most absurd setting of all—a waterlogged desert.

Playing with familiar feminine caricatures (the scorned lover, the siren, the frump), these three films highlight how women are reduced to stereotypes on film. With the same high production value—luscious cinematography, trained actors, original scoring, professional lighting—he has used to convincingly liberate men from macho expectations, Just here equates constructs of femininity with the artifice of cinema itself. Using Hollywood’s own visual language to critique filmic codes of womanliness, Just reveals his female characters to be no more reliable than the constructed surreal environments in which they are presented.

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7 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.

1 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013. All images courtesy of Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong & Paris. All photos by Guillaume Ziccarelli.

2 Jesper Just, *A Vicious Undertow*, 2007. Still from Super 16 mm on DVD, black and white, 10 minutes.

3 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.

4 Jesper Just, *Sirens of Chrome*, 2010. Still from RED transferred to Blu-ray, 12:38 minutes.

5 Jesper Just, *Llano*, 2012. Still from single channel Blu-ray video, 7:17 minutes.

6 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.

7 View of Jesper Just at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2013.

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