

# Libidinal objects in the performances of Mildred Rambaud

Text by Gina Buenfeld

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Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu: India. A mountain is set ablaze with religious fervour, invoking the fire and brimstone that formed the igneous protrusion millennia ago. This annual ritual honours the mountain's mythological significance: revered as a manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva who appeared as a column of light to relieve the universe from its state of darkness. This creation myth introduces the notion of duality, before returning Shiva to a state of unity with his female counterpart, Parvati, in the iconic form of Shiva-Lingam.

Ritualised performance and symbolic, sacred objects abound in Hindu cosmology, transmitting an ancient cultural heritage in which complex, pluralistic philosophies and traditions collide. To the uninitiated, the dizzying swell of visual spectacle, pungent smells, and clamour of thunderous sounds it involves may be bewildering. So too, its sculptural logic which implicates a pantheon of gods both aniconically (in the case of Shiva-Lingam) as well as anthropomorphically; simultaneously advocating the panentheistic principle (in which the divine and material are distinct) whilst embracing its opposite (in which they are identical). From within the world-view of Hinduism these contradictory phenomena no doubt make sense. Encountered from outside the theological paradigm, they retain a sense of indeterminate mystery.



Tits & Volcanoe  
Medallion I, 2017  
Jesmonite AC100  
Ø 44cm

This space of ambiguity is embraced as a productive lacuna in the work of Mildred Rambaud. When I visited her studio I was drawn to a series of new sculptures and drawings made during a residency at Zennor Project Space in Cornwall that bear a formal relationship to Shiva-Lingam. With disc-shaped bases and ascending cylindrical volumes, they are adorned with playful and tantalising imagery, sculpted in relief, of erupting volcanoes and voluptuous breasts, charged implicitly and explicitly with both masculine and feminine creative forces. The related drawings go further in disrupting binary assumptions such as passive and active, nurturance and ejaculation, by conflating the primary motifs (tits and volcanoes) to suggest a cosmic unity between complementary energies.

Rambaud's varied work across performance, film and sculpture, emerges from her voracious fascination with the world. Her personal encounters develop through intuition, into obsessions that dictate the form of their eventual manifestation. In this instance, *'tits and volcanoes'* emerged as a mantra, a linguistic echo persistently circling in her mind, until their meaning was ultimately distilled into way-

ward sculptures. Roughly sculpted in black wax, the series *Medallions*, occupies a contradictory status between the provisional and the monumental, the precarious and the fortified. Appearing as relics from an era of mortal battle, they allude to bravado, decorations of bravery, of pride and strength. Yet, rendered in this soft, precarious material, with aesthetic humour, they behave as provocations to such gendered power orders, honouring the female body and sexual energy as a sign of strength and fecundity, performing the function of protection through the symbolism of ornamental mammary glands.

Rimbaud has drawn upon legends of female empowerment in earlier works, including *Portrait and Spear* (2010), an abstract rendering of Joan of Arc. The painting obscures all recognisable features, save for a few gestures resembling the feathered crown of an Amazonian chief. It's counterpart is not a likely weapon but a painted stick, stood against a wall, marked with the colours and pattern of a court jester. Two subversive medieval subjects standing for feminine valour and masculine folly. The stick is a recurrent motif, signifying a line drawn with intention; at times radiating outwards as if marking cardinal directions to the heavens; or hewn with ridges, addressing the upright orientation of a body, counting each vertebrae as if a measure of time and growth. For me, Rimbaud's sculptures are always charged by a relationship to the body — her body, implicated in a cosmology that is distinctly her own. Like the ritual in Tamil Nadu, it is in this not knowing that the potent space of imagination is nurtured. Motifs recur: lines, directions, triangles, folds and discs: platonic forms that are insinuated in mysterious narratives that are only ever partially revealed.



Tettas, 2017  
Jesmonite AC100  
30cm x Ø 18cm

I've been mesmerised by Rimbaud's performances on numerous occasions. Having trained as a practitioner in the legacy of Butoh, she has an appreciation for discipline, of daily training, of distilling months of preparation into performances that captivate the audience's attention through movement, physical strength and something unnameable that is held in suspension. On each occasion, she has performed with an object: a delicately folded, waxed-paper fan; a metallic disk; an uncast clay vessel filled with water. It is the intimacy with which she attends to them that her surrender to the form is conveyed: not only to the form of performance, but in equal measure, to the process of making the object in the first instance. When cast as characters in her dramas, on stage or screen, they charge time and space with an elusive aura; when presented prone, on a plinth, in a gallery, their charge is no less powerful for residing latently in the material, which asks silently (whilst forbidden) to be handled.

*Paper Shakers* is a new chapter in the story that unfolded between Rambaud and one of her co-conspirators: the aforementioned paper fan. The original object now bears the impressions, residues and injuries of a long and active relationship. This latest work is made in 16mm film, in which Rambaud appears with three female performers, (the object and its many lovers create something greater than the sum of their parts) highlighting the ritualistic aura that extends beyond the object and the artist, into remote time and space. On this occasion the moment was 2016 and the place was Brittany, in the grounds of a classic villa, the atmosphere reminiscent of Godard's Villa Malaparte [Le Mepris] - an association reinforced by the formal relationship between Rambaud's concertinaed paper and those iconic steps.



*Paper Shakers*, 2016  
16mm, 8min

The embrace of film as genre, not only as medium, is felt in the cinematic quality and the tactile allure of the image – shot on 16mm the work is classic and seductively sensual whilst defiantly resisting nostalgia. Hair, fingers and toes caress the paper folds, Etruscan figures are submerged in water as if through the surreal mirror of *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), a soundtrack of beating drums and discordant noises calls a shamanic force into play, human gestures and the material behaviour of the sculpture convey deep rhythms of a corporeal knowledge that transcends thought, to desire – a yearning of the soul.

It is in this that I came to appreciate the way we invest emotionally in objects (mental and physical) and to understand these are merely ripples on the surface. In her sculptures and performances, the relations in between, Mildred Rambaud engages sincerity and humour as if compelled by the mantra of a great master:

*We think too much and we feel too little*

Charlie Chaplin

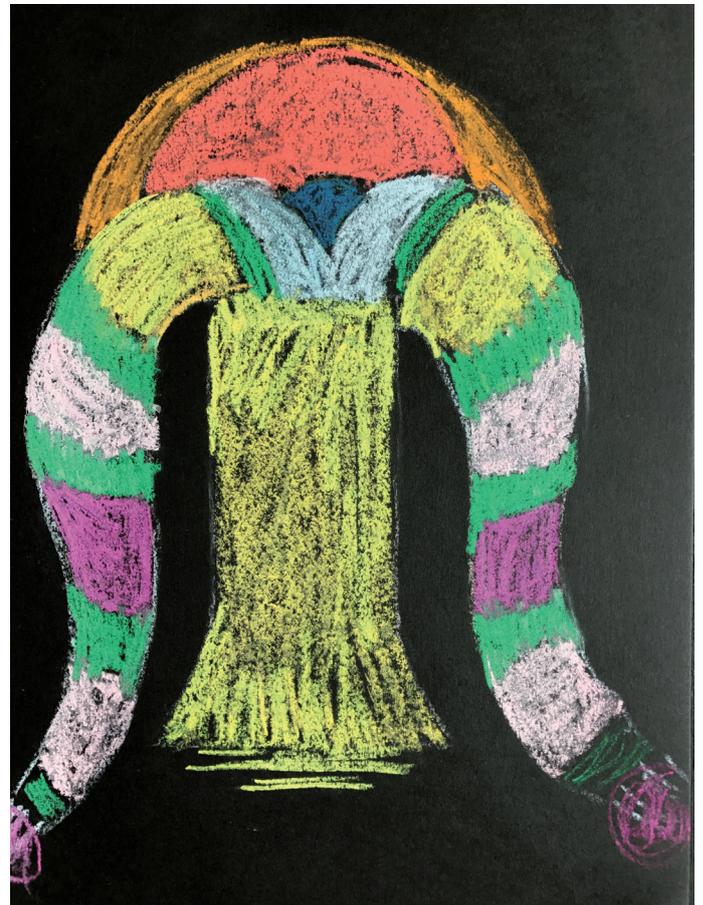
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Volcano days II, 2017



Volcano days III, 2017



Hot legs, 2017



La grande dame or Madame Volcan lost her head, 2017  
Cooked soil and wax  
3.5m x Ø 1.5m  
Sculpture can be found at Zennor, Cornwall

