

JILLIAN MCDONALD ✖ ZOMBIES

Curated by Lee Arnold

October 26–November 23, 2010

Opening Reception: November 12, 5:30–7:30 p.m.

Jillian Modonald is exhibiting recent videos that focus on the canon of American horror film and "fear as entertainment" exemplified in that genre. Unlike contemporary horror film itself, her artwork eschews extreme gore and violence in favor of stripped-down narrative, plot, and archetypes. Research plays an important role in her work, and her process includes reading film theory, watching popular films, and exploring fan culture.

Jillian Modonald is a Canadian artist living in New York, where she is Associate Professor of Fine Art at Pace University. Recent solo shows and projects include Rosenthal Gallery in San Francisco; Moli Hasson Gallery in New York; ThreeWalls in Chicago; La Sala Narañja in Valencia, Spain; and YYZ in Toronto. Modonald has received grants from The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Canada Council for the Arts, Turbulence, The Experimental Television Center, and Pace University. She lectures regularly in North America and Europe about her work and has attended numerous residencies including Lilith Performance Studio in Sweden, The Headlands Center for the Arts in California, The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Program and Harvestworks in New York, and The Western Front in Vancouver.

Images courtesy Rosenthal Gallery, San Francisco

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Jillian McDonald's zombie-themed videos, lenticular photographs, and drawings remove the "living dead" from their traditional narrative context in horror films, forcing viewers to confront the monsters' gruesome signifiers: festering wounds, decomposing flesh, lifeless stares, and lumbering movements. By isolating these archetypal features, McDonald dissects zombie film tropes from makeup to choreography to landscape setting, creating sly commentaries on popular culture and our society's fascination with and fueling of Hollywood's lucrative fear industry. The striking visual effects that McDonald achieves in her work transcend references to postmodern film theory, however, and allow it to simultaneously be situated within the broader visual context of the grotesque and the abject, work that urges viewers to examine their own voyeurism, anxieties, and ideals by staging traumatic encounters with repulsive, deformed subject matter.

Art critic Eleanor Heartney has observed that "the disruptions of deformation perform an important service: by presenting grotesque or abject representations of self and world, they subvert idealized representations and bring us closer to the truth of being human."⁴ *Horror Makeup* (2006) and *Zombie Portraits* (2007) embody the strategic collapsing of boundaries between "normal" self and "revolting" other by playfully dramatizing the transformation from human to zombie through the application of makeup. In the video *Horror Makeup* we watch as McDonald morphs herself into a zombie while commuting on the subway. The artist replaces the expected (a female beauty ritual) with the unexpected (makeup used to distort beauty rather than enhance it) and recalibrates our awareness of and reactions to the (extra)ordinary. The lenticular photographs that comprise *Zombie Portraits* also deconstruct the devices of horror, allowing viewers to separate out each stage of the transformation as they change their viewing angle. Both of these paradoxical projects unpack the particular power of zombie films by making us uncomfortably aware of both the artifice of zombies and their origins as/identification with living humans like us.

McDonald continues this theme in *Apocalypse Zombie* (2009) and *Field of the Dead and Undead* (2010), but extends her visual and conceptual vocabulary to include scenic landscapes and atmospheric effects, identifying what we might call the "zombie sublime": the use of the eerie settings of zombie films to unsettle viewers and manufacture a distinctive aesthetic. *Field of the Dead and Undead* includes a performative participatory element as well, in which McDonald applied zombie makeup to volunteers' bodies and trained them to move like the undead before filming began. Again, McDonald mines the territory between artifice (makeup and scripted movements) and authenticity (working with non-actors in a group setting) to unpack the trappings of horror films and our complex responses to them; we know that they're not real, but we're scared anyway. Like rotting apples in a Baroque still life painting, Jillian McDonald's zombies are memento mori for our media-saturated age. They remind us, with humor and disgust, that as humans we are, with every labored step, poised between life and death.

Kimberly Rhodes, Fall 2010

⁴ Eleanor Heartney, *Art and Today* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2008), p. 195. See also, Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).