JILLIAN McDONALD • *Redrum* • January 15 to February 26, 2010

Jillian Mcdonald is a Canadian artist, living in New York. Recent solo shows and projects include Moti Hasson Gallery in New York; Rosenthal Gallery in San Francisco; The Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe; ThreeWalls in Chicago; 1708 Gallery in Richmond, Virginia; La Sala Naraña in Valencia, Spain; and YYZ in Toronto. Group exhibitions and festivals featuring her work include The Edith Russ Haus for Media Art in Oldenburg, Germany, The Krannert Museum in Illinois; MMOCA in Wisconsin, The Whitney Museum's Artport, La Nuit Blanche Toronto, and The Sundance Online Film Festival in Utah. Mcdonald received grants from The New York Foundation for the Arts, The Canada Council for the Arts, Soil New Media, Turbulence, The Gunk Foundation, NYSCA, The Experimental Television Center, Thirdplace.org, and Pace University. She lectures regularly about her work and attends numerous residencies including The Headlands Center for the Arts in California; The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Program and Harvestworks in New York; DAIMON, Sagamie, and La Chambre Blanche in Québec; CFAT in Halifax; Em-Media in Calgary; and The Western Front in Vancouver. In 2009 she was in residence at Lilith Performance Studio in Sweden, The University of North Carolina, Asheville, and The Arizona State University Art Museum in Tempe, and Hallwalls.

Jillian Mcdonald would like to acknowledge the support of the Buffalo Academy For Visual and Performing Arts (Isabella Luciano, Jamíah Mootry, Rashard Cunningham, Zena Buckley, Eli Kelley, Hannah Belotte, Keon Roman, Denzel Williams, Jam Vafai), Sandy Ludwig and Mark Kerwood, Joan Linder and Paul Vanouse, Colette and Julian Montague, Dennis Maher, Buffalo Soundpainting Ensemble, Gerald Mead, and Cori Wolff.

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from the New York State Council of the Arts, Erie County Arts & Cultural Funding and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

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JILLIAN MCDONALD : REDRUM

Say Like—If Someone Burns Toast…

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Jillian Mcdonald's new piece, *Redrum*, is not that it is a genre examination, or that it investigates familiar tropes of that genre, or layers a critical perspective upon these familiar, time-worn tropes—it does all these things. But in doing all the things we expect art to do, critically, it's also just scary. Even though we know the devices being used, even though we know it's an artistic treatment of a popular form, even though the manipulation of image and sound is overt and direct, even though we may believe ourselves too savvy or jaded to buy into the manipulation—despite our awareness of all these aspects, Redrum contains genuine jolts, haunting atmosphere, and a believable sense of doom.

In certain previous works exploring the horror genre, Mcdonald's treatments have often included a layer of wry commentary. In *Horror Make Up* and *Vamp It Up,* the artist filmed herself on subway and bus commutes, applying makeup, with the resulting zombie/vampire look commenting on both the peculiar performance of publicly applying one's makeup and the increasing popularity of these iconic horror looks. Further exploring the cultural popularity of horror forms, Mcdonald has orchestrated large-scale, multi-person performances in Canada (framed within the conceit of a zombie movie shoot) and Sweden (where over 100 actors were positioned through several kilometers of dark forest to immerse the audience in a real-time spectacle). She has played directly with the devices and conceits of the genre, as in *The Screaming,* where Mcdonald digitally inserted herself into scenes from popular horror film as a protagonist whose screams drive the monsters away. She has even collapsed genres into each other, as in the recent *Alone Together in the Dark,* in which zombies and vampires face off in a Western-style showdown in the Arizona desert.

In these works, Mcdonald is perpetually distilling specific tangents of the genre—the look, the sound, the style—in an exploration of their effect on the audience. They have been performed in public and sometimes performed by the public. Her recent zombie-based performances have the additional good fortune of being synchronized with a high tide of cultural popularity for zombies, particularly in terms of the public's apparent empathic interest in dressing and acting undead.

Using Stanley Kubrick's iconic film *The Shining* as a point of departure, *Redrum* borrows that story's core of horrific premonition as a unifying structure. Blood is appearing throughout several homes, dripping from faucets, pouring down walls, pooling on the floor, at moments when the homes seem otherwise unoccupied. Ghostly apparitions appear, half-focused figures move, and in brief slashing instances, bloodied victims are revealed. There is the suggestion that past crimes have occurred and the sense that we are seeing more than one home suggests a killing spree.

The video is not intended as a meditation on *The Shining,* though it pays direct homage to the film with Mcdonald's pair of ghostly girls and the sudden shock cuts to blood-drenched victims. But many of the elements found in Redrum—the eerie stillness, the evil of banal interiors, long stretches of tense calm broken with abrupt action—are not so much borrowed from Kubrick as from the great wellspring of horror templates and genre details that Kubrick himself drew from. Like *The Shining, Redrum* is an homage to a form and to the psychology of fear.

Mcdonald's concise narrative content underscores that she is less interested in the exposition of any specific tale than in the mechanics of fear in general. After viewing the work several times, as though stuck in some horror-causality loop, the devices Mcdonald uses become more apparent yet, interestingly, no less unnerving. Exactly like a dj sampling various cuts, Mcdonald samples conventions familiar to us but creates a fresh concoction true to the genre.

Barren trees. The tops of houses. Architectural details. Gothic interiors. Chandeliers. Stairs. Dark wood. A graveyard. Grey skies. Dripping blood. Taxidermied animals. The play of light and shadow. Ghosts. The conventions Mcdonald is using throughout Redrum—in some cases, repeatedly—almost comprise a syllabus for H*orror 101.* Beyond familiar, they are archetypal to our understanding of the genre and the challenge is one of discerning whether these archetypal images still function or whether they are so familiar as to become trite.

The fascinating result is that they do work, remarkably well. Even more interestingly, if we remove the action shots (ghosts moving, blood dripping), we are left with a high proportion of predomi-nantly still images. Where previous works about horror have sometimes included humorous elements drawn from recognizing the occasionally ludicrous things about the form, Mcdonald deals quite directly with the stockpile of images that comprise *Redrum*. Playing it straight is one of the most effective ways to test a genre and it's proven repeatedly in this work.

Consider the deadness. Mcdonald's use of multiple still shots feeds the deathly pall in the work. Even the sometimes lush interiors feel cold and bereft. This tone is no doubt enabled by the fact that the only living thing in the work is a deer (and he's standing in a graveyard, of all places), but the tone is not wholly image-based. Mcdonald's soundtrack is a key element in her treatment of the genre. Still shots accumulate until interrupted by unexpected moments and sudden, sharp movements. Silence reigns until sounds swell before disappearing. Other sounds cut in like a thunderclap.

As if to further test the genre's resilience, many of Mcdonald's sounds also draw directly from extremely typical conventions. A child's muttering voice. Moaning. A music box. Even, most potentially banal of all, a loudly creaking door. Like the images, the sounds Mcdonald uses are innately affecting. In combination with the images, and coupled with a tight editing rhythm that moves between measured stillness and violently brief movement, the resulting concoction is undeniably potent.

While titles and credits delineate beginning and end, the work is structured such that it might begin or end anywhere. In a large bag of tricks, the inability to fix upon a narrative may be the most effective trick of all. Uncertainty breeds fear—not knowing what's around the next corner, not being to anticipate anything, is the conceit that keeps us on edge. Like the images and the sound, it hardly matters that we are cognizant of the manipulation working before us.

There is a core truth within the explanation Dick Halloran provides to Danny in the kitchen of the Overlook Hotel:

"You know, Doc, when something happens, it can leave a trace of itself behind. Say like—if someone burns toast. Well, maybe things that happen leave other kind of traces behind."

Mcdonald's new work demonstrates that the genre of horror functions despite our best efforts as deconstruction and intepretation. Its themes and motifs are effectively embedded within our dreams and fears, a slice of burnt toast with an everlasting residue.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator