

A Complex Tapestry of Text and Imagery: Karen Finley, *The American Chestnut*, Cornell University, May 10, 1996¹

Dean Wilcox

In an age when the American media landscape is clogged with politicians and religious fanatics scrambling to identify the root cause of our current malaise, it is imperative for live performance artists like Karen Finley to point out what is really to blame—politics and religion. In her most recent performance piece, *The American Chestnut*, Finley rails against religious hypocrisy, political oppression, male aggression, her own classification as a “source for raising money for candidates,”² and the depressed state of the arts.

Certainly, she is dealing with familiar themes that have dominated her solo performance work since the late '70s, but *The American Chestnut* is nothing if not a testament to how little we have evolved as a culture since Finley began performing. What is striking about this piece is that the in-your-face aggression that characterized her earlier work has been replaced by a more subtle, but no less powerful, method of performance. With this current work Finley tempers her vocal outbursts by intertwining compassionate stories of loss and survival with a compendium of imagery supplied by slides of her paintings, pre-recorded video, live video, and her own elegant, but disturbing gestures.

The piece began with Finley (clad in a white wedding dress worn in reverse) entering the performance space from the rear accompanied by the drone of a vacuum cleaner. So subtle was this entrance that until she began verbally assaulting the beloved children's character “Winnie-the-Pooh,” much of the audience was unaware of her presence. Simultaneously embodying the image of wife and mother through the intersection of her costume and her text, Finley undercut the suggested domesticity by the harshness of her narrative. In Finley's world, one recently altered by the birth of her daughter, Pooh and his friends still dwell in the “Hundred Acre Wood,” but now it is an S and M bar. While certainly a titillating image, the litany of dysfunctions associated with Christopher (“the enabler”) Robin's playmates—Rabbit, passive aggressive; Piglet, insecure

Dean Wilcox received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington in 1994 and since then has taught at the University of California, San Diego, Cornell University, and is currently assistant professor of theatre history, theory, and criticism at Texas Tech University. His writings deal with such diverse topics as: Robert Wilson's manipulation of the human form, Josef Svoboda's multimedia design for The Opera Company of Boston's 1965 production of *Intolleranza*; the convergence of chaos theory and contemporary performance; and the intersection of semiotics and phenomenology.

and who stutters; Tigger, manic depressive or hyper-active—illuminates how askew our values are from the cradle onward.

As Finley walked onto the stage-proper the overall tone of the piece began to take on another shape. Slides and a live video projection³ displayed images of flowers, a potent visual metaphor of death and rebirth that was soon extended to the narrative. *The American Chestnut*, as the title implies, is a work filled not only with references to nature, but to the American culture as an entity, like the chestnut, that is diseased and dying. The black walnut tree, the flowering weeping cherry, the maple, the lily, the iris, the chestnut, all connect with the projected images and stories to reflect life and death struggles and the blossoming and decaying of the American psyche.

As Finley intertwines momentary glimpses of the individuals that populate this American landscape with the recurring story of two women, Nicky and Lily (actually three women if you count Finley herself), it becomes apparent that *The American Chestnut* is indeed what Finley has described as a “sort of a feminist *Our Town*.”⁴ Like Wilder, Finley chronicles both life and death as a constant struggle for survival, but the struggles that she documents are those that tend to be glossed over by the media in favor of more dramatic (read “family value oriented”) narratives. Truly, as Finley spins tales of Mr. Dove, who writes MOS for “my only son” on the leaves of irises every Memorial Day since his son was declared missing in action; Nicky, who attempts to enter a museum only to find that Religion has replaced Art; Lily, who bakes cakes for all of the children she lost and writes her ex-husband an anonymous poem detailing how he “likes his cunts young;” and an unidentified woman who recalls narrowly escaping a brutal rape who concludes, “and if I’m lucky my face might be smashed up and then I’ll really be free,” we are forced to witness the daily struggles hidden beneath *our town*, the individuals that live and die on the opposite side of Wilder’s tracks.

As with much of her work, Finley describes the more dramatic victims of war and AIDS, but more strikingly she juxtaposes these stories with stories of survivors. The women who are raped and discarded. The wives who are divorced while their ex-husbands search for younger flesh. The black family that is physically and verbally assaulted by the police, forced to watch their possessions torn apart as the authorities frantically search for hidden drugs, only to be placated by a curt “I’m sorry wrong address.” The young girl whose mother admonishes her athletic interests by telling her, “You’ll never be as good as a boy.” The woman with her tubes tied who lost two children in the Oklahoma bombing who, when hearing about the doctor that offered to untie her for free, proclaimed it “a gift from God”; to which Finley retorts, “Gee, wasn’t that nice of God to *finally* show up.” The young boy abandoned at the mall by his mother

who saves for a 49 cent turtle that he desperately tries to keep warm because “the boy wasn’t going to let another creature feel like he felt.”

While the narratives that Finley creates always have an emotional power of their own (a power that is only intensified by her uniquely disturbing vocal style that ranges from deep throated howls to piercing screams to lulling whispers), it is the combination of imagery and text that completes this performance. *The American Chestnut* is filled with moments where the projected imagery not only reinforces the text, but combines with it to provide an experience that is both understood on an intellectual level and felt in the pit of one’s stomach.

For the section entitled “Thomas,” an achingly simple piece in which a man remembers his dead lover through the possessions that continue to surround him, Finley sits nearly motionless, backed by a slide of a vacant “flower” chair that perpetuates the established theme of death and rebirth. For the description of the drug bust Finley is silhouetted by a large screen video projection of writhing worms, eventually dissected by a butcher’s knife wielded by an unseen hand. Pacing back and forth in an upstage corridor of light, a video image of twisted feet frames Finley’s action as she verbally disgorges a litany of humiliations (some of which painfully resonate as Finley’s own experiences—



Karen Finley and the vacant “flower chair.” (from *The American Chestnut*, photo courtesy of Karen Finley).

“I’ve been ridiculed, put in squad cars, brought to trial, taken out of context, slandered on the front page, on the back page, on the senate floor”), others that chronicle Nicky’s fate as a woman in America—“She couldn’t be smart, She’d be sassy. She couldn’t have opinions, She’d be called angry. She couldn’t have power, So she’d become nagging.”

As striking as these combinations of text and imagery are, however, it is the moments when the two appear to be in opposition that provide some of the more memorable aspects of Finley’s performance. This technique of opposition seems to be a hallmark of Finley’s performance style. Not only does she continually snap the audience between laughter and tears (a devastating technique that at least partially accounts for the silence that greets her at the end of many of her performances), but she forces the viewer into the uncomfortable position of not knowing how to react. In *The Constant State of Desire* the audience was invited to objectify Finley’s physical presence, only to have that objectification questioned by the force of her narrative.⁵ In *A Certain Level of Denial* she described the conditions that prompted the suicide of one of her close friends afflicted with AIDS while kneeling in front of the harsh white light of an empty slide projector that cast a distortedly elongated shadow as she repeatedly struck the body of a child’s rocking horse with its own severed head.

The section entitled “Montecito” from *The American Chestnut* presents such a troublesome convergence of image and text. Standing in the blood-red light created by the projection of one of her paintings, Finley narrates the story of a woman who recalls narrowly escaping a brutal rape. As the story unfolds, Finley proceeds to wash her hands in a pan of soapy water. This is a gesture that is repeated over and over again. It is an image that at first appears to invoke the cliché example of Lady Macbeth attempting to wash the blood off of her hands, but as the section progresses, and the handwashing continues, the image becomes simultaneously compulsive and erotic. As the narrative unfolds, the gesture begins to take on the image of supplication and then anger as Finley narrates the woman’s desire to talk to God, only to be sent the American icons Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs (both of whom Finley describes as abusive role models who glorified their irresponsibility). As with much of Finley’s work, what appears on the surface to be a simple, and at times easily dismissable gesture, becomes a complex layering of emotions in which the audience is left stranded between extremes, not sure whether to respond with repulsion, pity, or sympathy.

Creating a situation in which the audience is unable to settle into a single emotion is also an aspect of two of the pre-recorded video sequences. Presented at moments when Finley is essentially “off stage,” the videos take us outside the temporal and physical frame of the performance. The first entitled “nude in museum” shows us just that, Finley naked and running around inside a museum.

While the image is certainly a humorous one (in which Finley appears not as the notorious “chocolate- smeared woman”⁶ but as a tourist playfully imitating the poses of famous sculptures), it also reminds us how objectified the female form has been throughout art history. Like the process of objectification in *The Constant State of Desire*, the video succeeds at allowing us to revel in the objectification of the naked female body, only to be reminded of the cost of that objectification.

Providing a female counter to this wholly male dominated field of art, the next video sequence presents Finley squeezing milk from her swollen breasts onto a sheaf of black paper. Like the “nude in museum” video it catches the audience off guard, initially provoking laughter by its strangeness. This image, eventually inscribed with the title “nursing painting,” works to completely undermine the process of male artistic expression that is documented by the earlier video. Indeed, what is instantly apparent is that this “painting” (one that will most likely never be displayed in the museum in which Finley cavorted) could never have been created by the male artists that the museum lauds as the finest examples of Western art.

While the pre-recorded images and slides of Finley’s paintings add layer upon layer to her dissection of American culture, the most striking aspect of this performance is her use of live video. Throughout *The American Chestnut* Finley manipulates a video camera aimed at the interior of a series of doll houses. From the perspective of the audience we are only permitted to see the exterior of these homes as they inertly sit on a series of TV tray-tables. But, through the large scale live video projection Finley is able to take us within this surreal landscape to show us images of mourning—represented by a tiny rocking chair surrounded by decaying roses, death—the interior of an empty jewelry box, and the crisis of American artistic freedom—exemplified by the current attack on PBS that Finley represents by projecting a close-up of a prone and suicided “Big-Bird.” Like her narratives these projected images work to illuminate the fact that within our homes, generally independent of media documentation, cultural and political decisions have profound life and death effects.

Tackling such American obsessions as the funding of the arts, big-time-religion, divorce, rape, the inequality of the sexes (on all levels), government intervention (on all levels), AIDS, war, mourning, and survival, *The American Chestnut* weaves a complex tapestry of text and imagery to remind us that our problems as a nation can not be glossed over by rhetoric or sound-bites. These aspects of our culture will not remain buried, but will continue to resurface as the disease ridden tree from which this piece takes its title continues to send up new shoots in an attempt to survive. As Finley exits the stage on her hands and knees plaintively scrubbing the floor she poetically reminds us that our human and

cultural cycle is one based on death and re-birth, disease and survival. It is this point that she metaphorically brings home with her final words: “the black walnut was the last to grow its leaves and the first to drop them . . . This morning the black walnut began to shed its leaves.”

Texas Tech University

Notes

1. This article is based on my observations as Finley’s slide and video technician for the Cornell performance. Due to this position, I was able to observe both Finley’s rehearsal and performance process, as well as informally discuss this work and other projects with her.

2. All performance quotations are taken from Finley’s text for *The American Chestnut*.

3. It should be noted that Finley designed *The American Chestnut* with two slide projectors placed downstage left and right so that she could move in and out of the projected images, and a single lens video projector placed down stage center. The video projector, the image from which Finley also moves in and out of, is used to project both live and pre-recorded video. During the Cornell performance, all slides, live video, and pre-recorded video images were projected onto a cyclorama which was approximately 25 feet from the edge of the stage. This distance in combination with the 2" lenses in the slide projectors allowed the images to fill most of the cyc.

4. Personal conversation with Finley during her residence at Cornell University.

5. For more information on this work, please see my article, “Karen Finley’s Hymen,” *Theatre Research International*, Volume 22, Number 1 (Spring 1997).

6. This statement refers to the now famous article by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The NEA Suicide Charge.” *The Washington Post* (May 11, 1990), A27. This description of Finley’s performance not only set off the fire storm that resulted in the NEA defunding of Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck, but caused then President George Bush to write a note to then chair of the NEA John Frohnmayer stating: “I do not want to see censorship, yet I don’t believe a dime of taxpayer’s money should go into ‘art’ that is clearly and visibly filth.” For more information, see: C. Carr, “Artful Dodging: The NEA Funds the Defunded Four.” *The Village Voice* (June 15, 1993), 30-31.