



## FRANCES GOODMAN

GOODMAN GALLERY | JOHANNESBURG

Frances Goodman,  
*I'm the happiest  
person alive*, 2007,  
Sequins, silk, thread,  
37 x 104 x 2cm

While the slick execution is immediately appealing, Frances Goodman's latest oeuvre offers no surprises. She employs her distinctive aesthetic; embellished slogans are used to highlight the inherent potency of language. Goodman only resorts to imagery to support language or to draw attention to the way it is used to disguise the negative impact that phrases can have on the psyche. Once again the artist turns her attention to well-used phrases that perpetuate obsessive behaviour. These loaded statements, displayed near the entrance to the gallery, are extracted from conversations replayed in her DVD installation, *Young Guns* (2007). Installed in the rear of the gallery, it features two bodybuilders relaying the thoughts that drive their passion to sculpt and ultimately exert control over their bodies in their frenzied pursuit of the body beautiful.

Phrases such as "it's never enough", "learn to love the pain," "your mirror is your tool" appear like traditional adages, especially the way Goodman presents them in brash sequined old-worldly decorative twirls that recall sashes customarily worn by beauty contestants. While the bodybuilders are no different to beauty pageant entrants, who modify their physiques to conform to an accepted ideal of beauty, one senses that they have long since achieved the ideal and are now caught up in a manic pattern of behaviour that they cannot halt. Not that they want to be released from their obsession; despite the physical and mental strain it incurs they derive a sense of pleasure and achievement knowing that they are able to master their physical selves – an emblem of success in our age. The phrases "it's never enough", "learn to love the pain," or "beauty is pain" have been so internalised by these body builders that they function as a mantra; they not only give these men the mental strength to overcome physical pain but also play a vital role in shaping their perception of reality.

"What you are saying makes it reality," says one of the body builders.

The shimmering sequins designs that Goodman fashions into these phrases immediately distracts attention from the harm they are capable of causing. Instead of parading their sinister influence they have an overpowering allure that draws viewers to meditate on the intensive handwork and flashy façade that envelops them. Goodman's inimitable aesthetic draws its visual character from the decorative arts. Embedding uncomfortable concepts in a seemingly innocent art making tra-

dition allows her to articulate the pervasive nature of language. Adages, slogans and self-fulfilling phrases that permeate our consciousness are hidden in unexpected places. This concept is revisited in artworks where phrases recalling graffiti in public bathrooms are embroidered onto silk fabrics with sewing hoops holding the stretched materials in place. The phrases range from confessional ("I feel so alone") to offensive gags that reveal underlying prejudices ("How can you stop a young offender from becoming an old offender? Commit suicide.").

Goodman suggests that language often provides individuals with the only outlet for expression. The deep-seated confessions, requests and statements that are sprawled across these embroidered works are taboo; they could never be verbalised to others. Yet the authors are compelled to make them public. It is only through their anonymity that they are able to bring them into the public domain. However, unattached to an identity these statements cease to function as personal opinions and become part of communal expression that reveals the dark underbelly of the human psyche where hatred, malice, fear and prejudice fester.

Mary Corrigan

## FRITHA LANGERMAN

BELL-ROBERTS CONTEMPORARY | CAPE TOWN

As the Enlightenment philosophers Diderot and d'Alembert, compilers of the famous *Encyclopedie* (1751–66), were aware, vast quantities of knowledge risk misinterpretation and confusion. In order to avert this, the two devised a system whereby knowledge is broken up into interlinking categories instead of the random alphabetical model. These conceptual divisions provided them with a plan to order data for their *Encyclopedie* that would allow readers to contextualize entries, thus preserving and democratizing knowledge. A consummate historian, Fritha Langerman disinters their model, contrasting their ordered worldview to contemporary knowledge accumulation.

*The Knowledge Chambers* acknowledges how the internet has definitively ruptured the systems ordering knowledge, and yet within its digital accumulation of knowledge a system, almost parallel to that conceived of by Diderot and d'Alembert, has emerged. This system is ordered by keyword searches and the hyperlinks. Knowledge is dispersed along the lines of association rather than accumulated around commonalities. The internet orders knowledge systematically but without the rational supervision of the Encyclopedist. The digital system

therefore ushers in an altogether different world view, one always threatening to descend into irrationality.

In Diderot and d'Alembert's scheme, knowledge is divided into three main categories: memory, imagination and knowledge. In *The Systems of Knowledge* series, Langerman takes these terms and enters them into Google image search, compiling linocuts from the results. The compositions, painstakingly executed in kaleidoscopic patterns, are intricately detailed and demonstrate the unlikely results generated by the internet's systems. Her sumptuous etchings are also densely packed with visual information and attest to her consummate skills as a printmaker. Despite Langerman's use of traditional printmaking methods, her exhibition is concerned with the contemporary passion for deconstruction and analysis. And in order to reflect this intermingling of the traditional with the contemporary laser cuts, sandblasting, digital prints, computer codes of post-script errors and website addresses make appearances in the *Advanced Search* and *Postscript Error* series, as well as her centrepiece, *Imago Mundi*. The latter resembles a cathedral's stained glass windows, but rather than allowing light to filter through the glass Langerman uses mirrors to reflect the white light of the room. The illumination is thus one generated within the viewer's space, rather than the transcendent glow implied by stained glass.

While Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedie* formed part of the foundation laid for the French Revolution, with its emphasis on logic and reason rather than religious teachings, we are inundated with evidence of a similar revolution in understanding brought on by the digital age. Langerman's exhibition operates like a crease in history, discounting the temporal distance between the Enlightenment and the contemporary era. Operating at the interstices of two world views, Langerman is able to rupture the developmental and sequential structure of the cathedral – that bastion of traditionalism and the scourge of those liberal, atheist encyclopaedists – with pieces that highlight random connections, hyperlinks and other aspects of the endless maze of knowledge collected on the internet.

As we have come to expect from Langerman, this exhibition is carefully composed and densely researched, balancing aesthetics against a profound interrogation of her chosen topic, in this instance contrasting the reasoning behind pervasive systems of knowledge. The sensuous appeal of traditional techniques like etching is contrasted with digitally produced pieces, making this is a demanding but ultimately stimulating exhibition.

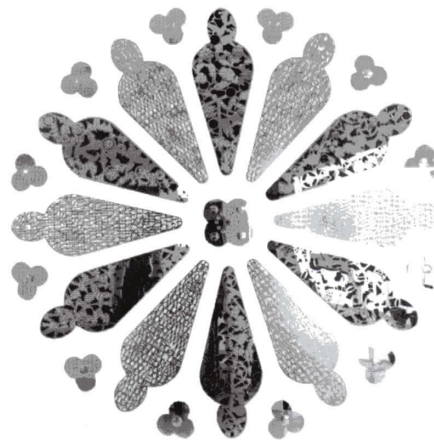
Tavish McIntosh

## CHARLES MAGGS

SALT PROJECT ROOM | CAPE TOWN

Theorist Bettina Malcomess once noted that Charles Maggs is possibly her "favourite contemporary, Contemporary video artist". I have to agree. With the recent increase and influx of crap video art, as well as the current *YouTube* explosion, it strikes me as pointless to produce more video. It almost feels pointless to attend video exhibitions these days. In fact, it almost feels pointless to attend exhibitions in general. You know, it's all on the internet these days.

But Maggs manages to side step this. His current work is fresh, honest and to the point. For his recent exhibition at Salt Project Room, *Prelude to Bitterness*, Maggs presented a series of videos projected on a loop, some text pieces and one



digital print. My initial knee-jerk response to the show is that Maggs fully understands the context of his exhibition: gallery versus project room. Where many young artists employ similar strategies for solo shows, they tend to cram a solo exhibition into a project room. And project room means project. Maggs displays a subtle understanding of this, with singular works carefully and strategically arranged.

A highlight of the exhibition is the work *Spacial*, 2006. Written and performed by Maggs, the video is slightly awkward and a wee bit eerie. Here, Maggs tends to reference a dialogue from *Lawrence Of Arabia*. But I find the work slightly more David Lynch, his production reminding me of the little scary 'Mystery Man' in Lynch's *Lost Highway*. But maybe this is just because Maggs bears a striking resemblance to actor Robert Blake, yet slightly younger if not prettier.

He employs similar editing strategies seen in boy-band Blue's 1994 single *You & Me Bubblin'*, where the dip to black function is slightly overused. But with *Spacial* this function seems to add to Maggs' one-liners. "Does it bother you?" he asks. "Is it dark yet outside?" "Have you had help with these problems?" "Have you got this fear that's going around?" I do.

It seems more appropriate to suggest that he is having a personal monologue with himself. Says Maggs: "I try to make scary art, but I am scared of horror movies." Moving away from the video work, an additional focal point of the show is found in a singular digital print (also functioning as the print invitation). The work consists of a beautiful low-res Swiss Alps landscape, text dominating the print with the words: "I hope you had a nice fucking holiday." I did.

I presented Maggs' work to a Scottish curator who responded in a Shcottish Accshent: "It's very funny. It would go down a treat in Europe."

Ed Young

top

Fritha Langerman,  
*Imago Mundi*,  
2007, chromed  
laser cut steel,  
laser cut mirror per-  
spec, Supawood,  
glass, compasses,  
240cm

bottom

Charles Maggs,  
*Holiday*, 2007,  
digital print