

The Pledge of Fidelity: The Pledge of Self Discipline

Anna Douglas on Louisa MacIver's on-going experiment

Since last summer, Louisa MacIver has undertaken an investigation. The *Pledge of Fidelity: The Pledge of Self Discipline*, which has involved her wearing a specially manufactured chastity belt, and keeping a diary and photographic record to capture her experiences and changing attitudes towards her body. What at first began as curiosity (MacIver's previous art had been concerned with issues of restraint, particularly that of women) soon turned into an intricate search for evidence. "What I wanted to find were historical accounts in which women spoke about their experiences of wearing a chastity belt. I wanted to find out how they were used, and who ultimately decided when it was to be worn." But her research was frustrated by the absence of historically substantiated accounts: even the British Museum wrote to say it was sceptical, believing a good deal of the historical references to be (male) fantasy.

Chastity belts, it seems, are shrouded in schoolboy mythology, of dungeons racks and balls and chains, but they are not, even for feminist historians, a subject for serious study. Realizing that the historical information she desired was unobtainable, MacIver decided to become the subject of her own research. She wished to cross the boundary between "heritage fiction" and reality, subsequently to become the evidence for the chastity belt's existence.

Finding someone to manufacture the garment was remarkably easy. An active interest in chastity belts in S&M circles, where women voluntarily encase themselves as part of sexual role play, has ensured a number of bespoke tailoring agencies. And whilst this "fashionable" appendage has been updated, from iron instrument of male tyranny to S&M toy, the rules of the game seem barely to have changed. MacIver's state of the art light-engineering plastic belt was still locked, and she did not possess the key.

When her diaries, and portrait photographs (produced with a female photographer) were shown recently in an art college gallery, many women (and men) regarded the project as evidence of her own self-loathing. Why would a woman wilfully sanction and exercise such male tyranny? MacIver's collusion with the edicts of male power is unsettling; her collaboration with men - a man-made belt, a man (her partner) possesses the key, and it is a man that she has chosen as a confidant (they will never meet, only write) - seems at best innocent, at worst flagrantly unpolitical. However from the beginning, she has argued that her investigation, as much as historical licence would allow, relies upon reproducing the authentic conditions through which the chastity belt is believed to have emerged. The male players in her experiment are then, one might presume, as integral to organizing this experience of restraint by social power, as the physical cumbersome of wearing the real chastity belt.

Pledge of Fidelity: Pledge of Self Discipline inhabits the inscrutable territory between conceptual performance, feminist body-art and personal catharsis. Characteristic of many (male) artists such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci during the 1970s, MacIver's actions similarly deploy her body as an artwork in order to alter her consciousness and come to an under-

standing of her body in a particular way. Her diaries detail the effects that the belt has had: a sore developing on her thigh, her sleep being endlessly disturbed, having to learn a new way of washing, of going to the toilet and of menstruating; and its psychological effects, of tiredness, irritability and frustration. A symbolic gesture would not, she rightly claims, have "affected everything I take for granted in my life. It would not have forced me to step out of myself, learning how quickly I can adapt to restriction". After two months she says she began to overlook the fact that she was wearing the belt and, when she finally removed it, could not sleep for discomfort.

Her appropriation of a chastity belt with its particular history of male power, and the site of her-female body with its particular biology, simultaneously site her project within a tradition of feminist performance attempting to reclaim the female body from its subordinate position within western culture.

What has undoubtedly infuriated many women about MacIver's project is its lack of feminist critique; an analysis of the subordination of women and their sexuality. Instead, MacIver aims, through her art, to transform the symbolic image of the chastity belt, from object of non-consensual restraint to object of consensual pleasure, and in so doing "empower women through traditional forms of disempowerment". Although she does not possess a key to her belt, she argues that, as the voluntary instigator of the project, she has reversed the edicts of sexual power: having submitted her partner to a regime of sexual abstinence very much against his will the project can only end when she chooses it to.

Such libertarian arguments, that individual agency overcomes entrenched systems of power, cut a fashionable swath through contemporary sexual circles. Witness the rising interest in new pomographies. S&M, and lesbian lipstick chic, where displays of social power inhabit that anomalous territory somewhere between replication and subversion; not to mention the more widespread fashion for bodice-gripping corsets, bondage clothing, stockings, and the underwired bra.

Ultimately, *The Pledge of Fidelity: The Pledge of Self Discipline* is a performance of paradoxes. Between the intimate relations of its two protagonists, artist and partner, personal and social contradictions have been deployed and negotiated. But to what degree can these private resolutions have effect beyond this enclosed private order? In going public, MacIver may well be enacting no more than a narcissistic display of sexual transgression. However, in making visible her transgressive act, she is converting the historically disclaimed existence of female fetishism into fact. For young women like MacIver, in their early twenties, this fetishistic display is political and empowering. An older generation, like myself, is more circumspect.

S&M strategies may become fashionable, but I think it is a safe bet that Marks and Spencer will not be introducing chastity belts into this season's lingerie range. But then who would have predicted their selling lacey corsets five years ago?

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NOTE:

Belt depicted *in situ* is Tollyboy Products F/B-100 Chaperon (reg. TM) with secondary shield. It is of 16-gage stainless steel, not of plastic; and closes with a seven-pin radial tubular-key lock. This is the Hark III locking system.

Louisa MacIver Untitled 1995



Photo: Karen F.