

Of Stadiums and Construction Sites

In the catalogue for Alicia's 2005 show at the Physics Room in Christchurch, the writer Harold Grieve suggested that the "urban order of decay" might be a symbol for the "perennial anxiety of late capitalism" (a quote from Walead Besty). Grieve pointed to one of a number of works by Alicia which alludes to this discourse; the word 'property' spray painted onto onion bags. This action gives credence to Grieve's suggestion of an economic-political reading of Alicia's work. His musings on consumerism seem perfectly apt. He developed a discussion around domestic environments and their interaction with the desires and failures of market forces. But there is another element to Alicia's work which seems to have been left out in his discussion. There is a personal-political element and Gymnastics might help to shed light on this.

It was a mutual friend who told me that Alicia had been a Gymnast and that a lot of her work related to this fact. When I asked, Alicia told me she had been a Gymnast pretty seriously between the ages of about 5 and 13. After I found this out, elements of her work seemed to make more sense. Its logic became a little more transparent. The Eastern Block palette, the sculptures that looked like, and were often made from, fucked up sports equipment. Even the physicality of it all, the way the work inhabited the space, seemed to be informed by an intimate but rather brutal knowledge of the space between and around objects. The danger and excitement of something suspended two or three metres in the air.

This biographical detail, Alicia's experience as a gymnast, is highly subjective. It is a very personal and intimate knowledge which few, at least in the art world, share. But it is no less important than the macro economic structure that Grieve so thoroughly explored. For this catalogue essay I asked Alicia to write me an email about her time as a gymnast. In combination with the work, this writing reveals elements of the personal quotient involved her art.



My club was called Leys Institute.

We used to go to Wasps gym to use their foam pit before we got our own.

We had to do the splits between two stacks of foam, which were raised off the ground. Then someone would push on us until we stretched beyond the splits and we would stay there for around 2 minutes and 30 seconds. Conditioning was half an hour to an hour of a 3-4 hour session and involved intense muscle work such as hanging from the high bar with weights on our ankles and pulling up to the bar, beyond a pull up to a waist stand, and then doing several of these.

There were fun things too like timed handstand competitions and mini tramp exercises, which were designed to make you stick landings.

I was good at tumbling. That is the run followed by a series of flips. For example roundoff flick flack double twist or full in back out etc. Once or twice I did a double back.

The bars were my least favourite. I remember once getting several bleeding tears on my hands, though I still had to finish training. Most gymnasts wear hand guards but that is only a safeguard and doesn't guarantee that you aren't going to break the skin when going around the bar.

When we competed we wore a white leotard with our club's logo in the middle of the chest. We also had a blue stripy tracksuit with blue and red stripes. The way we wore our



hair was very specific. Always tied back with a scrunchie or in a French plait on special occasions. My Nana Pauline made my leotards and scrunchies. They were lycra and very snazzy in design. I remember one leotard that was highlighter pink with black diamonds all over. It had a high neck, which was inspired by the styles of the 1988 Olympics, in particular my favourite Gymnast, Russian Svetlana Boginskaya.

It was a very psychological sport - even more than physical.

I was hooked to training and gym, but there were many days after school when I just wanted to go to the pools with everyone else and do normal after school activities but I was stuck training.

The last straw was going to the Nationals. I just got freaked out and couldn't perform any of the tricks that I had been training for on their foreign equipment. This was a dire situation and I knew my coach was furious, not to mention I was being watched by all sorts of selection people and spectators. I ran away and never came back to gym nor faced my coach again. (Though I did bump into him years later).

Rob McKenzie
in conversation with Alicia Frankovich