



Kalup Linzy Art In America February 2009

KALUP LINZY ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX

FOR ONCE I'M GONNA DO IT MY WAY. This is the chorus crooned by Whitney Houston—or, rather, by the homely yet endearing Patience O'Brien, who impersonates Houston in an *American Idol*-type talent competition. Or, rather, by Kalup Linzy, a husky young video artist wearing a gold-sequined dress that barely covers his left nipple as he plays the role of O'Brien in his 2007 video *Melody Set Me Free*, which opened the artist's recent screening at Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI). (Linzy's work is also included in the Rubell Family Collection's show "30 Americans," which is on view in Miami from Dec. 3, 2008, to May 30, 2009.)

Originally from Stuckey, Fla., Linzy began gaining recognition several years ago with low-tech videos featuring schlocky editing gimmicks, stilted acting and a cast of recurring characters based on soap-opera archetypes and Hollywood melodrama stars; many are played by the artist himself, often in drag. For his most recent videos, Linzy voiced and prerecorded all the dialogue, which has the lurching pace of a stick shift manned



Kalup Linzy:
Above, *Melody Set Me Free*, 2007, video, 15½ minutes; left, *Keys to Our Heart*, 2008, video, approx. 24½ minutes; at EAI.

sports a flower behind his ear, first stars in "Dirty Trade," where he is a lounge singer provocatively stroking his microphone stand as he lies on the floor. In "Edge of My Couch" (whose melody mimics Otis Redding's "The Dock of the Bay": *Sit-tin'*

on the edge of my co-uch . . .), he sits dejectedly in a dingy apartment. Finally, in "Water," Taiwan discovers new love on a sun-kissed beach with a man who resembles a 1970s *EST* trainer.

The New York premiere of the black-and-white *Keys to Our Heart* (2008) concluded the screening. This piece documents the unfolding of a love triangle (or, more accurately, love square) between Lily, a misanthropic grande dame played by Linzy; Dinah, Lily's friend and a self-proclaimed "bitch" who vaguely resembles Dinah Washington; John Jay, an earnest Keanu Reeves look-alike who is dating Dinah; and the even more sincere milquetoast Sally Sue, who is a friend to John Jay and Dinah. All the characters dispense advice to one another that mostly serves their own ambitions, and the plot's—ahem—climax coincides with a raunchy encounter between John Jay and Sally Sue, which the unwitting Dinah walks in on. Attempting to "work things out," Lily orchestrates a meeting between the three lovers that unexpectedly culminates in Lily's revelation of her love for Dinah.

Such is the stuff of trashy television, but Linzy's work doesn't come off as mere camp. Nor does it indulge in theatrical flamboyance (à la Candy Darling or RuPaul) or beg a cheap laugh with not-so-subtly sexist caricatures (like Martin Lawrence's Big Momma or Eddie Murphy's *Rasputia*). There is, however, an impulse toward escapism. During the Q&A after the screening, Linzy commented on the racism he experienced growing up in the South, adding, "But at the same time [people] never judged the characters [in soap operas] in the same way that you would judge someone in real life." Linzy's characters similarly discourage judgment, highlighting instead the messy questions of who people are, who they aren't, whom they strive to be, how they fail or don't and, most important, everything in between.

—Casey Ruble



by a driver's-ed student, and the actors, including Linzy, awkwardly lip-synch it during filming. Impersonation, narcissism and gleeful indulgence in clichés are mainstays of drag performance, but the clumsiness of Linzy's work infuses it with a raw self-deprecation that undercuts the very stereotypes and cinematic codes he uses to build his narratives.

The screening at EAI began on an optimistic note, with *Melody Set Me Free*'s O'Brien triumphing—by landing a coveted recording contract—not only over her mother, who insists that Patience's dream to become a star is "stupid," but also over competing contestants Hope, Faith and a conniving Grace. This piece was followed by the 2008 *SweetBerry Sonnet (Remixed)*, a series of music videos made to accompany Linzy's album of the same name. Combining heartbreak, humor, vulgarity and hope, the series predominantly tracks Taiwan—a character played by Linzy and featured in his earlier works—as he tries to recover from a breakup with his boyfriend. Taiwan, who wears an unflattering black leotard and

Linzy screened three videos at EAI on Jan. 14.