Ways of Unpacking: Danielle Dean
Charles Aubin

Can a fridge, a shovel, or a rake, even a coffee mill, dictate how you ought to behave? Artist Danielle Dean is willing to take the bet. In her 2018 video installation *Bazar*, we find her curled up on the floor, her back against a 3D rendering of a washing machine, lost among a profusion of home appliances. Looking both apprehensive and clear-sighted, she says: "I'm hiding in here because I'm also trying to find something, like trying to find who I am." For Dean—a British American artist of Nigerian descent—proximity to these objects will help in the search. Even a refrigerator or a clothes dryer prescribes predigested roles and values, and has been shaped by history and politics in ways that need unpacking. Now Dean is here to hold them to account.

Bazar was the result of Dean's exploration of the archives of BHV (Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville), a department store established across the street from Paris's city hall in 1856, during France's Second Empire. Through its name, "bazaar," transplanted from the supposedly exotic Orient, BHV promises (even today!) that customers will find everything under one roof—from bolts, nails, and screws to light fixtures, cell phones, and clothes. It was in this very department store in 1914 that Marcel Duchamp bought the five-tiered bottle drying rack that he elevated from a consumer object to a readymade. Now BHV also sells online, but even in the store's first decades, if you were unable to visit the capital you could buy into a Parisian lifestyle by ordering via its catalogs, which were distributed across France.

For *Bazar*, Dean focused on a century of this mail-order literature, specifically the sensual, aspirational Frenchness it sold to its clientele. She enrolled for the task four contemporary French women in their early thirties, some of them sharing an African or Caribbean heritage, all from Paris or its suburbs. The result is a surreal, fast-paced, ten-minute-long video in which we see the group making their way through the old catalog pages and new consumer goods. Real objects for sale intermingle with cutout pictures from BHV's promotional materials, as Dean's performers move from the shop floor, with its dozen washing machines in military formation, to a makeshift campsite of two-dimensional tents. In one shot, they take cardboard replicas of garden tools on the metro. Then the music blares as one of them dances alongside a human-size Nespresso machine.

Dean stitched together the narrative of *Bazar* from each of her four performers' own feelings and experiences with shopping and consumerism, gathered through a series of workshops prior to the shoot. The result is a video in which senses of time and place are roughed up; we move quickly from personal anecdotes to marketing slogans, and from marketing slogans to political pronouncements. This is a recurrent phenomenon in the works of this artist, who relishes juxtapositions of different registers and images. Hand-drawn, anthropomorphic cartoons of watering cans and alarm clocks strut across colonial maps; sleek 3D renderings of home appliances intermingle with cringe-inducing stock footage of a white mother and her baby on a perfectly rumpled duvet. The false comforts of the consumer catalog dissolve into the friction between these different registers of imagery—old and new, careful and hasty, cheap and expensive.

The hundred years of catalog research Dean undertook for *Bazar* was not the first time she dug so deeply into a consumerist archive. For her 2012 video *No Lye*—in which bathroom beauty chitchat turns into guidelines for making a bomb—she perused sixty years of back issues of the black US magazine *Ebony*. Her latest, ongoing project is also based on an extensive dig, this time into the archives of the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. At first, the artist focused her attention on depictions of the US landscape in the automaker's hand-painted adverts. She soon began re-creating a century of these idyllic pictures, but without the original cars—their absence striking a dissonant note on the American dream of "open land."

While meandering in the automotive company's file cabinets, the artist came across Fordlândia, a utopian pastoral—yet chiefly industrial—village Henry Ford built in 1928 in the Brazilian Amazon. Under the pretense of setting up a base to control rubber production required for the company's car tires, Ford ploughed ten thousand square kilometers of rainforest to build a fully functioning town, where he force-fed his bigoted morals to local indigenous labor. In Dean's video *Long Low Line (Fordland)* (2019), both Detroit and the Amazon collapse. The marble columns from Ford headquarters morph into rubber trees weeping sap, and the sounds of native Amazon insects overpower the soundtrack. The US car manufacturer is cannibalized by the Brazilians it came to exploit.

In the most recent development of her Ford enquiries, soon to premiere at Tate Britain, London, Dean muses on "post-Fordist" theories by cunningly substituting the Amazon rainforest with the global e-commerce company of the same name. It's a continuation of the artist's investigation into extraction, this time by exploring the now-prevalent gig economy and its system of crowdsourcing platforms. She met online gig workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform: the humans hidden behind so-called Artificial Intelligence who spend their days looking at endless banal images to train the algorithm, identifying a car here, a dog there. In an attempt to subvert the platform's usual anonymity, the artist has committed to work with Turkers on a regular basis—Wajid from Hyderabad, Amy from Portland, Jason from Vietnam—who from their far-flung bedrooms are collaborating on a joint body of drawings, sculptures, and photographs. Through this globally fragmented yet thoroughly intertwined workplace, they're at work building a world on their own terms.

D. Dean, C. Aubin