



NORA
HUTCHINSON:
REBEL
OPERA



I am a huge symphony,
weak kneed and wondering...

—Nora Hutchinson¹

Rooted in feminism, performance, and musical composition, Nora Hutchinson's artistic practice reflects the poetic virtuosity of a curious, questioning, and expansive mind. Constantly mining her personal experiences, she constructs complexly layered narratives unlike most video artists, performance artists, or theatre directors, though she operates within those communities. Her decades-long practice sits at the crossroads of these three media, a distinguishing factor, and a hallmark of her artistic approach.

Nora Hutchinson: Rebel Opera centres on her video practice, which cannot be separated from her script-writing and directorial work in theatrical performance art production. Discovering video art in the 1970s, when the medium first became available to artists, Hutchinson found her perfect creative outlet. Able to operate the technology with relative simplicity, she could focus on the complex visual and aural choreographies that her considerable imagination envisioned. The selected videos are unique combinations of performance documentary and cinematic collage.

Growing up in Hamilton in a conservative household that valued manners, traditions, and the grooming of a proper young lady, Hutchinson came of age during second wave feminism. Her grandmother taught her classics and opera. Hutchinson's early artistic practice is largely autobiographical—her expressive, stark and highly personal poetry is read aloud in her first videos, interspersed with experimental music, often with images of herself as she performatively navigates her appearance. Works from the 1970s and 80s revolve around self-representation and her exploration of identity in the context of women's liberation, in contrast to her upbringing. Hutchinson's later works delve deeper into theatrical performance, poetically activating personal and social issues, such as in the work *In Safe Places* (2006), a meditation on mental health and the environment.

The human voice, and its communicative potential, is a central theme in Hutchinson's work both through the videos presented in this exhibition as well as in the vast body of performance, installation, and sound

NORA HUTCHINSON: REBEL OPERA



Cees van Gernerden, *Opera Around the House* (production still), 1987, black and white photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Cees van Gernerden.

work that form the full picture of her practice. The rigorously composed interplay between voices, whether sung or spoken, can assume many roles, as in the case of *Opera Around the House* (1987) which mixes the style of folk, aria, and the vernacular. She regularly subverts the operatic form, often using a wry sense of humour and segments of poetry, pop music, and children's singalongs.



C'était un jeu de mémoire (video still), 1977, video, 20 mins.

Her literacy in the language of video is expressed in the same manner, with a complete vocabulary and clear intention, yet a free and poetic methodology. To quote the text of *Opera Around the House*, "In this inarticulate space we can go free."²

¹ Nora Hutchinson, *Opera Around the House*, 1987.

² *ibid.*



Go Away Heart (video still), 1978, video, 16 mins.

The exhibition consists of eight video art pieces, played chronologically, in addition to a documentary on her *Urban Moorings* project (2008), to demonstrate Hutchinson's independent curatorial practice. The video programme begins with *C'était un jeu de mémoire* (translated as *It was a Memory Game*) (1977) which mines the cyclical and elusive nature of memory. To quote her script, "What is remembered in the going out, is the way in."³ Over the course of *C'était un jeu de mémoire* Hutchinson records herself re-enacting the experience of receiving formal music instruction from her grandmother, through the use of mnemonic triggers of music and sound. This is represented through black-and-white shots of her hands pounding keys on a pump organ—the hollow sound forming a haunting soundtrack. The motion of her hands in performance, followed by the sound of her pen on paper as she writes out the script, conjures a marionette under instruction to create music. The lasting effect of this work is the mesmerizing tune—the organ emits a catchy carnivalesque tune that lingers as an ironic or sarcastic turn toward celebration and festivities.

Hutchinson's visible disdain demonstrates her personal growth beyond classical traditions, and a desire to create art and music outside the box. This work was made shortly after she enrolled in the Music Department at the University of Guelph, and then took the recently conceived Video Art class as a "bird course"—only to have it drastically alter the direction of her practice. Video became the perfect experimental outlet for her personal exploration of identity. Combined with her music training and knowledge of composition, video art offered a seemingly limitless array of visual and aural opportunities that would open wide the realm of self-representation she had so been longing for.

Go Away Heart (1978) is a melodic sound exploration with colourful blown-out imagery. In this work, Hutchinson grapples with the death of her father, who passed when she was eleven years old. The family dynamic changed at that point, and she was often put in the role of having to be amicable to visitors during that time of mourning, while struggling with her unexpected loss. In 1978, she was coming of age—looking back at her

³ Nora Hutchinson, *C'était un jeu de mémoire*, 1977.

childhood and defining who she would become as an adult. In the video, she speaks her own poetic script and layers the sound in a way that amplifies the complex emotions surrounding her father's death.

The child sits in the chair, knows the father is dead
... enjoys the special attention ... the mother
wears black ... the child doesn't feel very well ...
there are people at the door ... they are bringing
ham ... "thank you very much, we enjoyed it."

And the lake ice, breaking up along the edge of the
lake, and in the centre of the lake, a canoe, maybe.

I'm an ice breaker daddy, I'll break up this bad
dream. Everything's going to be alright, sweetheart.
Bullshit. Get lost you grief-gobblers.

I've got my back to them all, and I ain't never
gonna cry.⁴

Toward the end of the work, she begins compulsively washing her face, applying makeup, only to wash it off, over and over again. This scene is heavily laden with a jarring and bass-filled distorted jazz song—an anthem of grief, confusion, and disorientation that speaks to her lack of control. The work reflects her struggle to reconcile who she was, is, and will become.



Go Away Heart (video still), 1978, video, 16 mins.

While studying at the University of Guelph, Hutchinson freely explored the technologies and editing facilities available to her. With her friend and fellow artist Vicki German, she shot the piece *Salem II* (1981) in the countryside outside of Guelph. She used an early video camera and the two artists experimented with its capabilities. German recorded Hutchinson wandering around, adorned in an old family dress and a fur-trimmed hat. She navigates an unexpected body of water as

if she's trying to find footing in an unstable world, and with the expectation of doing so as a "lady," as per the expectations of her upbringing. She is not sure-footed; she is unkempt, unzipped, and barefoot, climbing over rocks and muddy water. The early technology is not colour-balanced and the videographer has trouble focusing—yet both of these qualities lend themselves well to the concepts of imperfection and struggle, which are ongoing themes in Hutchinson's work, as is her feminist revisioning of herself. The soundtrack is the sound of the video editing machines of the day—a straight recording of her pressing the record, play, and pause buttons.



Salem II (video still), 1981, video, 10 mins.

A year later, Hutchinson produced *Granny and Me* (1982), a now iconic work. The piece begins with a shot of Hutchinson thinking about lighting a cigarette on a stovetop burner, to the sound of her voice articulating vowels in French. This introductory scene spells out her desire to break away from the expectation of female domesticity. The work follows on the heels of her exploration of the representation of costume and femininity in *Salem II*, and *Go Away Heart*.



Granny and Me (video still), 1982, video, 15 mins.

⁴Nora Hutchinson, *Go Away Heart*, 1978.

Hutchinson reads letters she received from her grandmother, outlining mostly ordinary matters. She demonstrates the influence her grandmother had on her singing, but also the mundanities of everyday life. The layered erratic sound indicates her feelings of irritation, and her longing for the life of an artist. The last scene shows Hutchinson smoking while practicing opera singing—a poignant and pointed presentation of her rebel self.



Arrow Walk (video still), 1985, video, 15 mins.

Soon after, Hutchinson had a daughter herself, and her work pivoted to the exploration of her role and responsibilities as a mother. *Arrow Walk* (1985), a collaboration with her then-partner Ray Cinovskis, was conceived as a music video that follows her young daughter toddling along a sidewalk. The work is a fascinating point of transition to her later practice, and each of the four movements of the work's composition sow the seeds of works to follow. She introduces segments from a major piece that would come to fruition a few years later—*Dick and Jane (Spot and Puff)* (1989), which critiques a popular culture image of a nuclear family, an image of the ideal childhood expressed through storybook characters Dick and Jane. *Arrow Walk* segues into an intersection of two harmonized voices in long distance communication. The superimposition of telephone wires mimics the rhythm and duality of the voices, in unison while still remaining in open dialogue with one another. By positioning a dualistic long-distance conversation with translucent and fading imagery of figures and telephone wires, Hutchinson suggests feelings of isolation. The image of a child running down a snow-covered road overlaid with the details of a shopping list lays the conceptual groundwork for one of her next pieces, *Opera Around the House*, and the closing sequence once again highlights the potential of the human voice in dialogue with itself. Musical directions that

appear on screen, such as “dolciss. colla voce... pp dolce... No Rit. pp dim. pppp. ...” reveal the artistry and intent in the musical composition. The phrase “Ven-go in Tracia” (I Come in Trace) references the continued influence of Greek mythology.

Hutchinson’s explorations of normative gender roles reach an iconic point in her work *Opera Around the House*, which aptly demonstrates the deeply collaborative spirit of her practice, wherein she is often working with artist friends as actors under her direction. “We’re going to try to write the opera before the husbands come home,” say the women. Performers include local artists Cees van Gernerden, Annerie van Gernerden, and Hutchinson’s long-time collaborator Sue Smith, among others. All are gregariously performing hetero-normative actions; the men wear suits and carry briefcases while trying desperately to climb a sandy hill, but the women don’t conform—they laze around, chat amongst themselves, read in trees, and relax. In the end they fall out of the trees because they forgot to make dinner. The work is a piece of fiction, yet serves as a portrait of Hutchinson’s artist community at the time.



Annerie van Gernerden, *Opera Around the House* (production still), 1987, black and white photograph. Courtesy of the artist. Photo © Annerie van Gernerden.

When asked which work she is most proud of, Hutchinson often points to *Dick and Jane (Spot and Puff)*. A complex script describes the lives of two adults living with a false sense of security, inspired by the vintage Dick and Jane book series, an



If You Hate This Planet (video stills), 1997, video, 14 mins.



epitomizing example of stereotypical gender roles. In Hutchinson's work, the characters' lives are thrown into chaos when Jane awakens to their abject naïveté towards the world around them. The characters go through a process of negotiation and discovery. Hutchinson and her characters emerge into a more collaborative state when faced with the challenges of an industrialized world. This emergence is echoed in the lyrics of a folk song:

But man has come to plough the tide,
The oak lies on the ground.
I hear their fires in the fields,
They drive the stallion down.
The roses bleed both light and dark,
The winds do seldom call.
The running sands recall the time
When love was lord of all.⁵

In *Dick and Jane (Spot and Puff)*, Hutchinson's intricate script and focused camera work indicates her growing interest in writing for live performance, which she would document in video. Her practice evolved through the 1990s with several potent live productions, presented in this exhibition as video recordings. The story of Rosetta represented in *If You Hate This Planet* (1997) is part of an ongoing musical theatre performance that Hutchinson often returns to, such as *In Safe Places*. The work tells the story of Rosetta, a student of herbology, who suffers from anxiety and depression, and is confronted with a struggle between the natural and industrialized solutions. The scenario plays out in operatic tradition. The doctor, armed with prescriptions, plays the role of the villain. Rosetta could be a stand-in for the earth and the continued industrialization of the planet's resources. Her name also suggests that she could be a stand in for a connection to the lost knowledge of healing as the Rosetta Stone connected lost languages.

Whether working with poetry or a dense script created for performance, Hutchinson's works are complexly layered. Consistently drawing on her own history and experiences, and engaging artist friends as actors, Hutchinson's performances on video are expansive and nuanced narratives that only she can craft. While Hutchinson provides her audiences with signs, cues, and symbols throughout her works, she never completely releases the full, complicated, thoughtful, charged, and very personal picture. As mastermind, she holds back propositions and truths so that we might enter her narratives ourselves and find room for alternate responses and meanings. More is revealed in each viewing, and the profundity is sometimes even beyond Hutchinson's own reach. Because the artist works so intuitively, and mines personal history for universal narratives, her work is both relatable and utterly visceral. Ultimately, Hutchinson's practice is distinguished for its highly original, imaginative, and complex interpretations of life's moments—both big and small—that define who we are.



Born in Hamilton, Hutchinson has been producing and directing works in video, performance art, and installation art since the 1970s. She taught Media Arts at the Ontario College of Art and Design for over fifteen years, and also at the University of Guelph, York University and the Dundas Valley School of Art. In 1998, she received her MFA from the University of Guelph. She has been awarded the Leslie Nielson Award, the Portland Oregon Award for Film and Video, and the Video Roma Award. In 2012, she was awarded the City of Hamilton Arts Award for Media Arts. Hutchinson lives and works in Hamilton, continuing to produce elaborate works in song and performance for video.

⁵ Sandy Denny, "The Quiet Joys of Brotherhood," by Richard Fariña, track 5 on *Sandy*, Island Records, 1972, vinyl LP.



Opera Around the House (video still), 1987, video, 35 mins.



Dick and Jane (Spot and Puff) (video still), 1989, video, 22 mins. Production editor Jeff Bird.



Back cover: *Granny and Me* (video still), 1982, video, 15 mins.

Front cover: *Go Away Heart* (video still), 1978, video, 16 mins.

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