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A black and white photograph of a white door with a window and a hand on the wall. The door is on the left, and a hand is visible on the right side of the frame, reaching towards the wall. The wall is textured and appears to be made of stone or concrete. The floor is dark and tiled.

SEX, MAYHEM, AND GHOSTS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Antirealism, visual artifice, and stylized action are helping
artists explore the irrationality of a changing world

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK AND LONDON/COMMISSIONED BY TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, 2013



Even in a season of blockbuster gallery spectacles in New York City, Marcel Dzama's "Une Danse des Bouffons (A Jester's Dance)" stood out. This elaborate exhibition last October sprawled over David Zwirner Gallery's two Chelsea spaces and combined sculpture, painting, and the moving image in a manner deliberately evoking the interdisciplinary experimentation of artists during the first half of the 20th century. The video from which the exhibition took its name mimes the exaggerated theatricality and unnatural effects of German Expressionist film from the 1920s. Opening with the awaking of the female nude in Duchamp's notorious *Étant Donnés* (1946–66), who was modeled after the artist's real-life lover, the sculptor Maria Martins, the looped narrative takes his subject through a series of ordeals, during which we glimpse Duchamp being tortured while shouting out chess moves. The work culminates in a bizarre cabaret scene in which torture and entertainment seem indistinguishable. A trickster figure and a bizarre four-eyed master of ceremonies preside over a series of acts, including a Spanish dance by a Minotaur based on a painting by Picabia, a sensuous ballet by a sword-wielding executioner, and a turn by a cloaked figure referring to Joseph Beuys. The final scene re-creates Picabia's *Adoration of the Calf* (1941–42), as the Minotaur looms menacingly over the upraised hands of his worshippers. It's not clear what

it all means, but there are evocations of such universal themes as birth, death, redemption, and destruction.

Dzama, a Canadian-born artist who is best known for Surrealist-inspired drawings and dioramas that blend an apparent childlike innocence with scenes of mayhem, dismemberment, and gore, here channeled such early modernist spectacles as Picasso's collaborations with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, Oskar Schlemmer's 1922 *Triadic Ballet* and, a bit later, Dalí's unforgettable dream sequences for Hitchcock. This kind of multimedia extravaganza is becoming ever more commonplace in an art world where distinctions between entertainment, popular culture, performance art, and theater are becoming harder and harder to parse. Recent seasons have seen similarly ambitious productions from artists like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, William Kentridge, and Matthew Barney. In the hands of these artists, outmoded genres like the Western, the silent film, the folk tale, the horror flick, film noir, and vaudeville are exploited for their essential surrealism, and with anachronism serving as a portal for a sideways look at the changes that are roiling us all.

Video still (previous spread) and installation view at David Zwirner (opposite) of Marcel Dzama's *Une danse des bouffons* (A Jester's Dance), 2013, black-and-white video projection.





But while such spectacles often draw on art history and mildly discredited forms of popular entertainment to make oblique commentaries about our own time, it is clear the history means something rather different from opposite sides of the gender divide. Male artists, such as those mentioned above, often replicate the unequal positions of the sexes that are integral to their source materials. Women artists delving into this territory are more likely to rework and reinvent old genres to cast light on their problematic roles in the past and present.

Two cases in point are the multimedia explorations of Mary Reid Kelley and Marnie Weber. Reid Kelley is a young artist whose work was recently featured in “Mary Reid Kelley: Working Objects and Videos,” a retrospective jointly organized by the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz and the University Art Museum at SUNY Albany. Reid Kelley, who was born in South Carolina and currently resides in Saratoga Springs, New York, works in collaboration with her husband, artist Patrick Kelley. The films they create riff on *commedia dell’arte*, German Expressionist movies, and newspaper comic strips, reimagining them in a format that resembles an animated drawing. They leap promiscuously through history and mythology, emphasizing moments when gender roles and social structures were in flux.

The films are largely confined to black and white, with costumes, sets, and props that, even if ready-made, are outlined in thick black lines that give them a cartoonish quality. The characters wear homemade masks or faces painted white with eggs propped in their eye sockets, emphasizing a weirdly skull-like aspect. The narratives are dominated by chatter, as characters spout rapid-fire and often hilarious monologues rife with puns and rhymes. In an interview with blogger Tyler Green, Reid Kelley notes that she uses these devices to undermine the logic of language, embedding a betrayal of meaning in the spoken texts that mirrors the betrayal of reason portrayed in her narratives.

To date, she has completed seven films. The earliest are very short and based on women on the frontlines of World War I, among them a nurse and a munitions worker. These culminated in the more elaborate *You Make Me Iliad* (2010), which focuses on a female sex worker at the front. Discovering that the primary sources about prostitution in the Great War were all written by men, Reid

Kelley accompanied her heroine’s commentary with that of a male soldier and a medical officer who monitored the brothels. Here, as elsewhere in her work, Reid Kelley transforms rather grim source material into playfully satirical skits that mock the unbalanced power structures and stilted gender roles that confine her characters.

Feeling the need to give her heroine more agency, Reid Kelley transported her to the French demimonde in *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011). The film centers on a pregnant Parisian prostitute who exemplifies Baudelaire’s paean to the superiority of cosmetic over natural beauty. With sets that shift between Sisyphus’s boudoir and the streets of Paris, the work is an antic romp through Revolutionary and post Revolutionary France, with brief vignettes involving everyone from Diderot, Marie Antoinette, and Marat to Robespierre, Napoleon, and Haussmann. In a commentary on the fate of overly aggressive women, it ends with our rebellious heroine carted off to Charcot’s sanatorium.

Reid Kelley is currently at work on a trio of films, two of which have been completed. The first, titled *Priapus Agonistes* (2013), is very loosely based on the classical Greek myth of the Minotaur. The artist places the now-female monster’s fabled labyrinth in a church basement and transforms the Minotaur’s hunter into Priapus, a minor Greek fertility god. Here he is imagined as the cocky star of a church volleyball team who is egged on by a Greek chorus of contemporary beauty queens. We also get a flashback recounting the seduction of Queen Pasiphae by a bull, a union that led to the birth of the Minotaur. All characters are played by Reid Kelley herself. The second film in this series, *Swinburne’s Pasiphae* (2014), returns to the seduction scene, this time reenacting an obscure poetic fragment by the Victorian writer Algernon Charles Swinburne that brings out the insatiable and socially disruptive nature of female desire.

Priapus Agonistes presents sexual politics seen through the simultaneous lens of Greek mythology, 1950s-era American Christianity, and Victorian prudery. History serves as a distorted mirror to suggest the misogyny also at work in contemporary society. And indeed, that is the message that runs through all Reid Kelley’s films.

Politics are more sublimated in the multimedia presentations of Los Angeles-based artist, musician, and performer Marnie Weber. She is less interested in history per se than in the themes of female repression and liberation and the dark workings of the unconscious as they manifest themselves in art, fairytales, mythology, and fantasy. Weber’s work draws on the language of punk rock, Halloween, and spiritualism,

OPPOSITE A production still from Marnie Weber’s *Songs that Never Die*, 2005.

which was, of course, another early modernist obsession. Using a mix of digital, Super 8, and 16-millimeter film, she produces what she refers to as “moving dreamscapes” in which spirits, monsters, humans, and animals mingle in evocative environments where spatial, temporal, and psychic boundaries have dissolved.

Weber was a musician before she was an artist (and in fact, she currently performs with the noise band Faüxmish), and it was this that led her to one of her longest ongoing projects, *The Spirit Girls*. She notes that while she was growing up in the 1970s, she found no female role models for her interest in progressive rock, and the Spirit Girls came along as a response. They are the ghosts of a fictional girl band whose members died tragically. Now they come back, mute and masked, to drift through multiple realities, seeking resolution to the demons that plagued them in life. Over the course of their incarnations in various short films from 2005 to 2010, they come to life in a spooky Victorian house, revive their act before an audience of appreciative animals, wander through a desolate Western town before falling in with a group of hobo clowns, cavort around a campfire with other spirits and monsters, and abandon their doppelgänger ventriloquist dolls on a deserted beach before walking into the sea and dissolving into the mist.

The Spirit Girls began as video personages, but they eventually became actual performers before being laid to rest twice, once on film and once in Mountain View Cemetery in Altadena, California, where, dressed in animal costumes, they played before a live audience. Following their demise, Weber has continued to explore the female transformation in allegorical tales of sexual and psychic awakening. *Eternal Heart* (2010) adopts the silent-film format complete with text panels and bleeds, flickers, and other distortions designed to evoke a vintage film rescued from oblivion. It tells the tale of a young girl who escapes her oppressive home life through death, where she finds kindred spirits among the strange hybrid creatures of the afterworld.

In 2012, Weber presented a new film at Marc Jancou in New York. Like the films in Reid Kelley’s retrospective, *The Night of Forevermore* was screened in an installation filled with props, collages, and costumed effigies. It takes its cues from Hieronymus Bosch and Henry Fuseli, whose paintings seem at times to come alive in the film. It presents a coming-of-age story about a young girl (played by Weber’s daughter, Colette Rose Shaw) who

encounters monsters, demons, and hallucinogenic creatures, including a sinister old witch played by Weber herself, as she travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven. While the first two realms are full of dark shadows, heaven is blindingly white, though even here dreams become nightmares. Weber notes that it is meant to resemble a crack den where our heroine is caught between good and evil. She is working on two related productions that will extend this narrative into a feature-length film.

Weber’s interest in spiritualism underscores an interesting paradox. Belief in the occult and exploration of paranormal phenomena like ghosts, fairies, mesmerism, and telepathy exploded in the early 20th century in tandem with the rise of new technologies and interest in scientific explanations of physical phenomena. Far from being the antitheses they appear to be today, materialistic and spiritual understandings were regarded as equally valid responses to the upending of tradition. Weber sees the rise of spiritualism as a moment of liberation for women, who were often the practitioners, and humanity in general, as people threw off the belief in an omnipotent god to seek truth within themselves.

For both Reid Kelley and Weber, anachronism helps underscore a parallelism between past and present. At the dawn of the modernist era, unsettling and even shocking visions of a dehumanized, diminished, or mechanized humanity served as expressions of what Robert Hughes referred to as “the shock of the new.” Contemporary art’s return to a similarly disruptive sensibility suggests our own kinship with a moment when technological and social changes threatened to upend every aspect of peoples’ inner and outer realities. Devices like antirealism, visual artifice, and stylized action borrowed from early modernists allow artists today to tap into the currents of irrationality that surface in times of change.

For Reid Kelley and Weber, the historical association between women and irrationality makes this artistic language doubly potent. They reclaim the realm of dream and fantasy to point the way forward to a more egalitarian reality. ■

Stills from the videos *Priapus Agonistes*, 2013 (top), and *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*, 2011, (bottom), by Mary Reid Kelley with Patrick Kelley.

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