

Emotional Rescue: The Film and Performance Works of Marnie Weber

Marnie Weber in Conversation with Mike Kelley

Mike Kelley: When did you start to perform?

Marnie Weber: When I was in art school (1977–81) I played in an art rock band called the Party Boys (1979-87). We lived in downtown Los Angeles, above the Terminal Produce Market, and performed at different bars near our studios. The Party Boys experience was very important for me; it taught me about music, recording, and the do-it-yourself attitude. At that time very few artists lived downtown and there were no other bands. We would go into a bar and offer to play for beer. We played in a bar called Jacarandas, which was a truckers' bar. Later we performed at Al's Bar; we were the first band to play there.

K: Was Al's already an artists' bar at that point?

W: Artists were drinking there, but nobody was performing there. We were able to talk the owner, Marc Kreisel, into letting us perform; we built the stage, which remained there for years. The bar was located below the American Hotel.

K: Artists had studios in the hotel?

W: Right, it was an old hotel, and artists lived and worked there. We were all sharing another old hotel, nearby on Spring Street. It was a fun time to be living downtown. It was very safe; we could walk the streets at night and really call it our neighborhood, until the '90s. Then with the introduction of crack cocaine things got scary.

K: How did you hook up with this group of musicians?

W: They were artists and an architect, and we all happened to be living in the same space. We played music at night just for fun. I didn't really know how to play anything, although I had played guitar as a child. I picked up bass. The music was primitive, with heavy drumming; it was different from what was happening in the Hollywood punk scene.

K: How did the people at these bars respond to your music?

W: For the most part people were really excited; there was a lot of dancing and drinking. Jacarandas catered to the truckers who delivered produce to the Terminal Market, because it was the closest bar. Later they brought in strippers, and a seedier element started showing up. A handful of our friends would come when we played, and some nights we would have fifty people, so we considered ourselves quite successful.

K: Then the Party Boys went to play and live in England?

W: Yes, we lost our lease and decided to go to England, where some of the band members had spent time. We barhopped again, and then we found a bar in Canning Town called The Bridgehouse that was owned by the father of the bass player of England's post-punk, goth band, Wasted Youth. We performed there, with not a lot of success. We became broke, so we went back to downtown Los Angeles.

K: I've noticed that the Party Boys are never mentioned in the published histories of LA/Hollywood punk. It surprises me, since it was such an early punk band.

W: We were always outsiders. We played in Hollywood a few times, but there was definitely an "east side vs. west side" mentality at that time, and we were downtowners. Our first record, *No Aggro*, came out on Bruce Licher's downtown-based hand-press record label, Independent Project Records. Bruce was putting out some amazing music—bands such as Savage Republic, Camper Van Beethoven, Human Hands, Perry Farrell's first band, Psi Com, and many others. Sonic Youth was an adjunct part of that scene, with their early downtown LA performances and the release of their 45 "Death Valley '69," which came out on Iridescence Records.

K: Were you doing solo performances at this time, or did that come after?

W: It came directly after the breakup of the band. I didn't want to be in another band that might break up; I wanted to be in charge of my creative future. This was during the heyday of performance art, in the '80s, and it seemed like an interesting thing to try and something I could do alone. My performances are theatrical musical performances, which consist of me performing solo or with other people, in costume and with very basic narratives. I take on different characters, usually down-and-out figures who go through some sort of difficulty to become empowered in the end.

K: Were there any artists in the local performance scene that you identified with, or did your performances grow out of your own sense of play? I saw your early performances, and they were unusual. There weren't many artists making work that was so character-oriented during that period. There was a strong anti-theatrical bias in Los Angeles performance art. *High Performance* magazine,[\[1\]](#) in particular, promoted that position.

W: That's true. It was during the time of minimalist performance and Chris Burden. In fact, Chris was my teacher. He was clearly coming from a different place in terms of performance. At the same time, "blood and guts" performance was occurring in the U.S. and abroad: body art, like the Kipper Kids[\[2\]](#) and Hermann Nitsch. That genre was an interesting development that paralleled minimalism in a way.

K: You studied with Chris Burden at UCLA?

W: Yes. In his class I worked with costumes and props, but the class was more geared toward minimalist performance. There were a few people at the time who were doing theatrical work, like Johanna Went[\[3\]](#) and Richard Newton.[\[4\]](#) I identified with them.

Performance that is baroque and overblown, with lots of props, sets, and costumes, can still carry a message of simplicity.

The first performance I did outside of school was *Of Caryatids, Of Rat, Of Marnie* (1987). I wasn't in costume or character. Other performers were mounted up in the corners of the gallery, like Greek caryatids, chained to the walls and painted red. Some people were fencing. There was a drummer behind a wall, and the small gallery space was filled with sound equipment from Rat, the company that did the sound for Black Flag's stage shows. It was a sculptural gesture, and the whole piece was visually interesting, but ultimately I felt uncomfortable not being in costume. That was the first and last time I performed not in character.

K: In your performances, the characters you develop sing songs in their own "voices"?

W: Yes. For instance, the character Joe A Deer, A Female Deer sings about running off into the forest and being free. In that performance (*Music for Daydreaming*, 1988), the instruments—the guitars and microphones, etc.—were hung from the ceiling and the performers were suspended above the audience from parachute harnesses. I always try to use very theatrical visual devices in my performances. I was on a ladder, and my dress came down 12 feet. I made all the costumes myself.

I performed as the Old Lady (in *Songs from Intimacy Island*, 1989) at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions). I created my own backing tapes and played live instruments over them. My guitar was on a walker. The audience response was prerecorded. The Old Lady is a washed-up starlet. I wore a rubber face that I pulled off, becoming younger. I performed as the Old Lady at least eight to ten times.

These were one-night performances. I wouldn't get a space for longer than that. It was a lot of work. I would have to break it all down the next day and haul it out in truckloads.

Next I created a character named Happy. The series was called *Cry for Happy*. I created Happy's bedroom, consisting of a bed and very '70s striped wallpaper, in the Rosamund Felsen Gallery (*An Evening of Three Performances: With Anita Pace, Jean Rasenberger and Marnie Weber*, 1994).

K: Describe the Happy character.

W: She is a girl who tries to be happy all the time, but deep down she's disturbed and naïve and absorbs a lot of the craziness around her. She has a mental breakdown, and then she transcends—becomes a butterfly and ends up in the forest with her animal friends. I released an album of the songs.

K: Did you do that for each performance?

W: During that period I did three solo records (*Songs Hurt Me, Woman with Bass*, and *Cry for Happy*). Each record was a limited edition with a hand-collaged cover.

K: So, none of these projects linked to the records were presented at galleries as regular exhibitions?

W: No, they were still just one-evening events. It became discouraging, because I never got to have a space for a full month, like other visual artists did. That is partly why I switched to films and sculptural installations, just to have a space for a month. Also, I feel that performance art in the '90s slowly became cheapened as everybody and their uncle started doing it. A lot of people were onstage, just talking about their problems. But I still loved performing, and so later on I brought it back as part of my practice.

K: There's a lot of pathos in your performances. The characters are universally pathetic, despite the clownishness of them.

W: I was really going for that dichotomy. There's a lot of dark humor in the performances. The characters are kind of Chaplinesque—naïve, awkward, and innocent, as if from another time or place.

I created an outer-space character for a performance titled *The Eye Prison* (1994). She has a wall sconce as a face mask, holds a rake, and sings a song about the eye prison—about how people are trapped in the world of the visual and physical. She came down from outer space and picked up this garb at a thrift store. It was first performed at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and then re-created many times, including a performance sponsored by Theoretical and presented at a gay leather bar in Hollywood. [5] Much of the male audience was in chaps. I think I was the only girl performing that night, which wasn't untypical of that period. I then toured as this outer-space character in Prague and elsewhere in the Czech Republic. Once again I was the only woman on the lineup. Young girls came up to me and said that they had never seen a woman onstage before.

K: Amazing!

W: I know. This was just five years after the Russian occupation, during which it was against the law to gather in groups of more than 15 people. I was playing with several heavy metal, Frank Zappa-inspired bands. All guy bands. I'd open for them in big venues, small venues, in coal-mining towns . . .

K: How did you happen to go to Prague?

W: An artist friend, Barbara Benish, hooked me up with a promoter over there. They wanted to bring something different from the States . . . and they got me.

The character that transitioned me into making films was Coquette (in *Coquette, the Circus Girl*, 1992). This was the first time I made a Super 8 film to project behind a performance. Coquette's story is that she came to Los Angeles to be a movie star and ended up in porn movies. In the film, she's on the street, walking up and down, and then she goes inside a triple-X theater, where she frolics with a stuffed pony.

K: I recognize that theater. It was in Hollywood, near Santa Monica and Western. I used to live right down the street from there.

W: Really?

K: Yes. Did you ever go inside?

W: No, I didn't, especially not in that costume. I was dressed as an innocent little circus girl. In the film, *Coquette* becomes one with the pony.

K: It's such an ungainly image, because you're the horse's ass. You can barely walk. The horse is just a big lump that you struggle with.

W: I'm impaled through it.

K: That image is a good example of something pathetic and yet . . .

W: . . . charming.

K: Well, it's funny. I can't help but laugh, even though I feel I shouldn't. You can't even stand up.

W: I like to get that mix of funny and disturbing.

K: The film has an old, silent-film quality because of the slowness of the action. Not long ago I saw D. W. Griffith's silent melodrama *Broken Blossoms* (1919) for the first time. It really reminded me of your work.

There are often extremely exaggerated portrayals of girlishness in your works. "Femininity" always seems to be an issue.

W: Vulnerable and naïve female characters interact with very masculine figures. The horse (in *Coquette, the Circus Girl*), for example, is a symbol of masculinity. In later films the masculine is represented by pigs, bears, and clowns. There's quite often an interaction with other characters who themselves are lost or grappling with not being very together. A lot of my work is about figures in need of being rescued, and who's really in charge is called into question. Fairy tales are much like that: the hunter in such tales is really killing the aggressor inside of him/herself. When my characters perform these animal rescues, it's really because they themselves are lost. But I want these broken characters to become empowered, ultimately. In *Quest for Happy* (1995) the Blue Bird of Happiness gets lost in the snow, and it's up to Happy to take the responsibility to save it.

K: I saw a performance by you at LACE in 1994, in which you interacted with a toy bird hanging on a string. Was it the same Bird of Happiness metaphor?

W: It was primarily a symbol of loss. It was a crying baby doll covered with yellow feathers, as if it had been tarred and feathered for being bad. That performance was a variation on the Happy character.

K: I thought it was one of the saddest things I'd ever seen, and there was nothing there—a lump of plastic on a string, your very slow movements, you singing a dreary song. It was very affecting.

Quest for Happy was the first animal-rescue film?

W: Yes, and there were many more to come. Happy goes out into the snow with all her friends, dragging them by a rope. She has this sense of responsibility; she's taking on the burden of others.

K: She's a do-gooder.

W: Yes, a do-gooder. But we all know do-gooders have their own agendas.

K: Yes (laughs). Where was the film shot? It's an amazing Alpine-looking landscape.

W: In the Angeles Crest forest, in winter snow. I wore a Christmas wreath on my head, and a child's snow jacket.

K: At this time, were you already making the collages of nude female figures cut from men's magazines, set in natural landscapes?

W: Yes. Those two different worlds didn't exactly fit together. Though I felt in a way that I was rescuing these naked women from the life they had had in the pages of the men's magazines and giving them picturesque settings to reside in.

K: And then you began to integrate animals into the scenes?

W: Yes, and then I couldn't stand looking at so many images of naked women anymore. I began putting photos of my own characters into the collages. It was then that my two practices became more parallel: the performances/films and the collages. When my own characters were in my own landscapes, the collages became more narrative in a disjointed sort of way.

K: Do you think that your attempt to "naturalize" the nudes was an ironic gesture, or were you actually attempting to do so?

W: I think I was trying to look at them as figures in the landscape from an art-historical perspective. I really was attempting that. This was a time when women were trying to reclaim their own bodies.

K: When the nudes were paired with animals, I tended to understand them as equivalent figures, as part of nature. But when you inserted your own characters into these scenes that changed the relationship between the figures and the animals for me: then the psychology of pet ownership was introduced. In your films, the characters have animal friends, but they are dependent figures. There's a lot of projection onto animals.

W: In the film *Destiny and Blow Up Friends* (1995), all of Destiny's animal friends die and she breathes life back into them by blowing them up again with air. This is part of Destiny's own death and rebirth. That's how I see it. I never see the animal friends as separate characters. I see them in a Jungian sense: they're different aspects of the lead character's psyche, played out through a dream world.

K: *Destiny and Blow Up Friends* was shot at the Salton Sea?^[6]

W: Yes. She wakes up in the middle of a flooded trailer-park landscape. As she slowly walks through it, more and more animals attach themselves to her. She becomes overburdened by them. This can be symbolic of one going through life and taking on friends and feeling the paradox of love and burden at the same time.

K: As I watch this film, the friendship with the animals seems one with the apocalyptic scenario. The landscape of the Salton Sea is one of the most incredibly apocalyptic landscapes I've seen in person. All of the resort homes, still filled with furniture, flooded and abandoned.

W: . . . and polluted. There are dead fish everywhere.

K: Everything's dead. The first time I went, the only people there were bikers racing in the desert. It looked just like the film *The Road Warrior*.^[7] It is one of the sorriest places I've ever seen, and to watch your character interact with the stuffed animals, it's like someone cuddling a dead infant.

W: (Laughs.) It's true. Then Destiny gathers up all of her friends and heads out into the sea in a boat named *Fate*.

K: Seems like an ill-fated trip.

W: My films tend to have happy endings, though.

K: I don't know. It's not always so easy to tell.

W: The next film was *I'm Not a Bunny*. In it, a bunny is being hunted through the woods. I keep saying, "I'm not a bunny." The forest is burned. The forest, for me, is always a metaphor for being lost. A forest that's burned is doubly lost, ravaged.

K: You have a great sense for filmic location. These places don't seem real. They look completely archetypal.

W: I try to find landscapes like that.

Then I made a color Super 8 film titled *Breath* (1997). I wear an old-lady wig, a mouse's nose, and a stretch pants outfit with a tail. I'm carrying a suitcase and running through a volcanic landscape. I open up the case, and in it is a mouth-to-mouth-resuscitation training head. I give it mouth-to-mouth in a futile attempt to bring it back to life.

K: It's a horrific object! It looks like a lopped-off head in a box. That scene reminds me of an amazing performance I saw at the Los Angeles County Fair. A little girl gave a demonstration in the 4-H pavilion on how to give mouth-to-mouth, using a full-scale resuscitation dummy.^[8] It was lying on the floor, and she knelt beside it. She was wearing a lavalier microphone, and as she blew into the dummy's mouth the microphone beat time on the floor—thump, thump, thump, thump. It was disturbingly sexual; it looked like she was kissing the dummy in time to an electronic beat.

Your films are very much like dreams. I commonly dream of being lost in labyrinthian locales.

W: I constantly have dreams about being lost as well. When I make these films, they are like dreams unfolding to me. I don't pre-analyze them. I storyboard them, but only afterwards do I analyze them as one would a dream.

The next film (after *Breath*) was *Red Nurse and the Snowman* (2000). This one is heavily laden with symbolism. It's the closest to a popular fairy tale. The character is a mix of nurse and Red Riding Hood. She's out in the mountains, looking to save lives, and comes across blood in the snow. The red, in the virginal white snow, is very symbolic of the menstrual cycle. The film ended up referencing birth, which I hadn't intended at all. The nurse meets a mouse who gives her directions; he appears to be blind, but he can see. She lifts his gauze, he points direction, and then she puts the gauze back over his eyes. He prefers being blind. All of the animals that she comes across are hypochondriacs. A limping rabbit with crutches keeps mixing up which foot is lame.

K: Do you see any link between hypochondria and art?

W: Yes. It's like you're sick, and you're trying to heal yourself.

K: And you capitalize on your sickness. You get people to pay attention to you. And you don't really want to get better.

W: Because if you got better, you would stop making art.

K: I believe *Red Nurse and the Snowman* was the first time that you took a set piece from a shoot and then showed it as a sculpture in a gallery.

W: Right. I constructed a set of a Swiss chalet, based on a design from a craft store. I showed films on monitors inside of it in the gallery.

In the film, the nurse goes into this little chalet and looks out to see a snowman in the snow. I play both the snowman and the nurse. The snowman is twisting in the snow, and when he walks away you realize that he was the one who was bleeding, because he leaves a trail of blood. He falls down into the snow and penetrates the snow with his carrot nose repeatedly. The character is a mixture of masculine and feminine.

K: By the time you made this film, you'd already started showing in galleries?

W: Yes, I'd shown collages, and the films. Now the collages were following the same lines as the films, using the same landscapes and characters.

K: And you'd branched out into sculpture.

W: Yes, and I began to show costumes as well.

Red Nurse and the Snowman is one of my favorite films.

K: I think it's my favorite as well. It's so visually powerful. I very much like the color limitation to black, red, and white.

W: Then I made *The Forgotten* (2001), about a lost princess with her animal friends. The characters are all white, with accents of silver and pink, and it was shot at night. This time the animals try to rescue the woman, but they can't because they're powerless.

K: All the action takes place in a wet garden around a pool. It has quite a gothic feel.

W: True. It's also less narrative. I became interested in losing the narrative at this point.

K: With this group of ghostlike figures, it seems to presage the Spirit Girls band.

W: The figures move through space like zombies; they just become forms in space, really. There is very little drama, but that was my intention. I was trying to make the sets and costumes sculptural, to break down the definitional barriers: What is a costume? What is a sculpture?

K: Working with costumes and masks, you make it difficult to differentiate between a costumed figure and a sculpture.

W: I'm interested in the presentation of historical costumes on mannequins in museums—like in roadside museums with dioramas that use costumed mannequins to present old prairie or Western scenes, for example.

K: Much of your work is reminiscent of tableaux vivants. I'm reminded of a certain strain of pictorialist performance of the late '70s and early '80s, the performances of Robert Longo or the performances/films of Jack Goldstein. Goldstein made a performance in 1977 of two fencers,^[9] which came to mind when I saw the documentation of your

performance that incorporated fencers (*Of Caryatids, Of Rat, Of Marnie*). These earlier performances were very simple, iconic, and frontal—moving pictures, basically. Of course, in your films you have moved beyond that—they are spatially complex. But your installations still have the feel of tableaux vivants. They often consist of figures in front of a backdrop.

W: Yes. In the gallery context I also like to play the figures off the art on the wall. Are they looking at the art? But the figures themselves are art—so the art on the wall becomes props in a stage set.

But I do want to play with space. The installations are not frontal. They require the viewer to move through the space. I think of the viewers walking around them as a performance.

K: You've also started making animal sculptures that are singular and far more finished than the kind of prop pieces you've presented in the past. I'm thinking of the warthog sculpture (*The Warthog, 2007*) that you showed in the Patrick Painter exhibition *Sing Me a Western Song*, for example.

W: I think of those as the playthings of the Spirit Girls. They are like beautiful large-scale toys. I'm playing with scale. The Spirit Girls live in a different reality, so scale is not stable.

K: Let's talk about the Spirit Girls project. The Spirit Girls is an actual band that performs your music. Tell me first about the development of the concept.

W: It was born from my interest in the theatrical rock shows of the '70s, which were big stage productions with light shows and projections and bands that dressed in costumes.

K: Who, for example?

W: The early version of Genesis; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; King Crimson; Black Sabbath. I went to see all of those bands maniacally. These '70s groups inspired my music. But I thought, "Where are the women?" There weren't any progressive rock bands with women in them. As an adult, I thought it would be interesting to create a female version of such a band. The Spirit Girls is a fictional '70s rock band whose members died and never made it onstage to achieve the fame that they deserved. The band members are all girls, except Dani Tull, who dresses as a girl. There's a cello player, a violin player, a drummer, and a bass player. It's a big band. We all wear masks, so each girl looks like the other. At one point I transform into what's supposed to have been my earthly life when I take off the mask. The project has gone further than I anticipated. The band became known and we put out a record. But I still consider the band a piece of conceptual art.

It's interesting, the Party Boys started out as a highly visual band and then transformed into a rock act. I think that commonly happens with art bands.

K: The same thing happened with my art rock band, Destroy All Monsters, in the '70s. We never aspired to be a touring rock band, but that's what happened after the artists left the group.

W: I think what's going to happen next is that I'll transform into another character and do some solo performances for a while, then perhaps work with the band again later. My next performance will be a live score for my new film. We'll see what happens with the Spirit Girls. For five years the Spirit Girls appeared in my collages and I made four Spirit Girls films. Each one was an interesting journey.

K: Briefly describe the four films.

W: As in all my earlier films, there is a great emphasis on the soundtracks. They really set the tone and feeling of the films. The first film, *Songs That Never Die* (2005), is the introduction to the Spirit Girls and the first film in which I began to use other musicians on the recordings. Previously, I had written and recorded all the soundtracks for my films alone in my basement on eight-track reel-to-reel. Visually, there is a gothic stage set with a backdrop painting. A classic sheet-covered ghost looks at a spirit. There are two forms of spirits together, which is supposed to make you aware of how spirits and ghosts are portrayed.

K: The second ghost is animal-like.

W: It has rabbit ears.

K: In Western culture, we have lost the complexity of depictions of beings in the afterlife that is found in other cultures or in our own earlier, more pagan, culture.

W: It's been homogenized.

So, in the film the Spirit Girls represent female spiritual bonding. They wear Victorian nightgowns because they are very repressed. A lot of their activities are designed to overcome their repression. They have a birthday party for the lead Spirit Girl, who's dead, so what kind of birthday party is it? She becomes a little girl.

K: I'm fascinated by Goth culture. I think this obsession with death is a kind of infantilism. Death prevents one from becoming an adult; one is forever young.

W: Yes, the Spirit Girls are young forever.

The leader moves through a living flower landscape, where the women are flowers.

K: This scene reminds me of the flower costume that Peter Gabriel wore in Genesis.

W: I was inspired by Peter Gabriel's flower costume.

Many times, in these Spirit Girls films, the lead character falls asleep to wake up in a different landscape and a different situation.

K: There is no stable reality.

W: I keep layering and layering and layering, going further and further into the dream.

K: The films are very hallucinatory in that way.

How do you work with the performers? The actions are simple but at the same time look very choreographed. Is there much improvisation?

W: There's some improvisation, but the beauty of wearing a mask is that I can be barking orders the entire time.

K: So, you're telling the actors what to do while you're performing?

W: Yes.

K: Do you look at a monitor while you're working?

W: No. It's shot on film, so I never know what I'm going to get. I've shot an entire film that came out black.

So, the Girls get together to put on a theater stage show called *Songs That Never Die*. They put up posters all around town, but no one comes because the posters are invisible because spirits made them. A group of animals that can see spirits do come. The animals are clearly people dressed as animals.

I liked the idea of filming a stage show and incorporating it in a film, because it adds another layer of reality.

K: That's something that Busby Berkeley often did in his musical films. He created impossible stage worlds within the narrative context of the films. His films are quite hallucinatory, though they were intended as pure entertainment.

W: I'm definitely trying to penetrate the subconscious in my works, even when they are narrative films. I think of the art audience as akin to a film or theater audience, and I want them to get sucked into and become part of a scene.

My next production was *A Western Song* (2007). I moved up to 16 mm film. It was shot in a full Western town set used for Hollywood films. The lead Spirit Girl emerges from a trailer, leaving the womb, leaving home. All of the other Spirit Girls are very frightened, and they peek out of the window to watch her as she ventures into the real world for the first time.

K: It's very comedic. She looks like a hick, outfitted in a straw hat, with all of her belongings in a bandana.

W: It's a very American image: the trailer-trash hick. It's a world that I was really trying to embrace. She's an innocent: she comes across a lamb with a bright pink rear end, but she passes the rump and moves on. She decides to remain virgin.

All of the country dresses worn by the characters in this film are from thrift stores. They are square-dancing dresses.

K: Despite the fact that Los Angeles is so urban and multicultural, this connection to Western culture remains. Not only because of Hollywood, but because there is still an agrarian culture outside the city that still embraces this aesthetic.

W: Yes, I embraced that in this film.

Then the Spirit Girl goes out onto a pier in a pond and looks into the water and sees her reflection, like Narcissus. She then sees herself submerged—a reference to Ophelia. She's killing off her naïve self. The rest of the group goes to look for their leader. She's nowhere to be found in the abandoned Western town, but they meet bad guys: a pig and a donkey playing music in front of a saloon. One of them is playing a large saw that's positioned in his crotch. It turns out the leader of the Spirit Girls is in the saloon, which is a brothel. She has lost her straw hat. It's a drunken scene. She's fallen into a messed-up world.

K: It's similar to the plot of the *Coquette* film, where an innocent character becomes enmeshed in a sordid reality, like in an old-fashioned morality play.

W: In this case, the character chooses to enter this world. It's as if her weakness propels her into a greater consciousness. In the next shot, you see her in a corset, tied up on a bail of hay, rocking to and fro, channeling a spirit.

K: This image is presented as a kind of lurid peep show.

W: I was thinking of the Spiritualist shows of the 1880s. The Fox sisters performed fetishistic Spiritualist stage shows.^[10] They were tied up, they wore slips, and their feet were displayed on pillows.

K: Nudity in such shows was defended as necessary in order to prevent trickery.

W: I love the idea of spirituality as entertainment, as fetishistic soft porn. That's what I was going for with this character.

K: It's similar to the popular *Exorcist* films. A little girl utters torrents of foul language, and it's excused because the whole thing is presented as a Christian parable.

W: Though I think that these female Spiritualist performers were actually empowering.

K: At that time there was no place for women in organized religion. Spiritualism was a way for women to function in that sphere.

W: And this phenomenon paralleled the women's movement during the same period.

K: There are even some crossover figures.

W: After this scene, the Spirit Girls put on animal-head helmets, and they become powerful by becoming animals. Finally, the Spirit Girls are shown in a field, surrounded by horses.

K: This is a far different take on the animal image than the evil animal figures in the Western town. The headdresses are naturalistic depictions of animals, and the Girls are in proximity to real animals.

W: It's the first time I've used real animals. But the Girls parade around wearing animal-head trophies, as if the animals had been hunted and then resurrected on the Girls' heads. Afterwards, the Spirit Girls give flowers to their leader and welcome her back into the tribe. They disappear and are replaced by live horses.

The next Spirit Girls film was *The Sea of Silence* (2009). The idea in this film is that the Spirit Girls finally get a voice, but it is through ventriloquist dolls. Each Girl has a doppelgänger, and the dolls screw things up. The Spirit Girls channel their lowbrow audience's subconscious and combine it with their own utterance, so that their philosophical conversations are mixed with meaningless barroom jokes. When they finally get their voice and are able to spread their message, it is turned into a messed-up barroom situation.

K: It sounds like a metaphor for the art world: throwing pearls before swine.

W: Yes, I was thinking specifically of my history of performing and how it feels to perform onstage. The dolls become the ones in charge. Then there is a sex scene where the dolls and audience get drunk and fool around. The dummies are used as sex objects; their breasts are exposed and fondled. I had the dummies made larger than the living girls.

K: It's very confusing. It's hard to tell which is which.

W: Because they all wear the same masks, but the mouths of the dolls move while those of the Spirit Girls do not. *Ventriloquism*, in Greek, originally meant "from the belly" and referred to the channeling of spirits through a doll. I didn't know this until I made this movie.

K: It's another example of spiritualist practice that has been turned into a form of entertainment.

W: After the sex scene, the Girls emerge from a cave onto a beach, as if the cave were the bar. It was filmed at Leo Carrillo beach.

K: Another amazing location.

W: It's where the famous love scene in *From Here to Eternity* was filmed, the scene where the couple kisses on the beach as the waves crash.[\[11\]](#) I like that history.

K: In Southern California we are surrounded by locales that have been made iconic by the fact that movies have been shot there. The setting in your film, again, doesn't look real. There are seals on the rocks, and unusual birds. And then you've heightened the unnatural look of the place by pushing the color, which is very intense.

W: The Girls are unnatural too. They have big breasts and doll-painted faces.

K: They look like sex dolls.

W: That's what I was going for.

K: The dummies are more believably sexual than the Spirit Girls are. All the sexuality in the film is played out through inanimate sex objects. It seems very clearly to address the objectification of women.

W: It's also about being repressed.

K: As your films have progressed, they have become more and more visually opulent.

W: I'm trying to get more baroque, more over-the-top. *The Campfire Song* (2010) is the latest Spirit Girls film. I wanted to do something with the classic American tradition of telling ghost stories around the campfire. The film is non-narrative. Nothing really happens; the characters just sit by a fire and then dance around. It was inspired by the scene in *Of Mice and Men* where the two characters sit by a campfire and one says, "Tell me about the rabbits, George."[\[12\]](#) I wanted to do something very simple like that. The film is very visually affected.

K: It may be simple in terms of narrative, but it's incredibly baroque visually. It reminds me of a hallucinogenic sequence from a drug-exploitation film.

W: I thought of that too. It's psychedelic—like a drug-induced dream sequence. The Girls are covered in dirt, and their dresses are ripped.

As for the (related) installation, I wanted to create something more sculptural. There's a tree, a fake campfire, and the animals—the animal characters are presented, but not the Girls. The video is simply projected onto the wall, like a landscape backdrop.

K: What is your next film going to be?

W: My next project will be a silent film, shown at a graveyard location. It's about a silent film star who might have been buried there. I'm not quite sure yet. I'm not going to wear a mask, which will be interesting, because I've become very dependant on them. I will have to express emotion in my face rather than through my body. The look will be heavily gothic.

K: So you're continuing to explore Goth iconography?

W: Only because it will be shot and set in a cemetery.

K: How is the Spirit Girls material presented at Le Magasin?

W: Each Spirit Girls film installation has its own room. There is also a room for older films and a room for documentation of live performances, CDs, and catalogues.

I have also created a new installation of demonic underworld creatures in a boat, positioned in front of a backdrop painting of a stormy sky. It is called *Happy Go Lucky, the Darkest Journey*. This project has led me into a new direction of non-reality-based creatures. They are dark, creepy, monsterlike characters.

K: So, there is no single figure in this new work that represents you, as the main Spirit Girl does?

W: There is a female figure, but she's demonic, with horns. She's on a journey in a boat with seven other demonic characters. I'm attempting to delve into the darker side, trying to create something akin to the iconography of Bruegel or Bosch. I feel like I'm cutting through layers and getting deeper. I was thinking about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when I made the piece,^[13] and I feel as if I am embarking on a journey up a murky river, in order to explore my own inner demons. The typical notion of happiness suggests that one has exorcised one's demons, but, for me, it's more the case that I've learned to live with my demons. It's as if my demons are my friends.

[1] Founded by Linda Frye Burnham in 1978, *High Performance* was a Los Angeles-based quarterly arts magazine. Originally focused on performance art, the magazine later shifted its emphasis to works that were more specifically sociopolitical in nature. The magazine ceased publication in 1997.

[2] The Kipper Kids (Martin von Haselberg and Brian Routh) were a performance duo formed in England in 1970. Both men portrayed the character Harry Kipper, a barely lingual lout. The performances were a highly physical mix of slapstick comedy and more formal prop manipulation. In the late 1970s the duo were actively involved in the Los Angeles performance art scene, but are often linked to the city's punk history because they performed in nightclubs as well as art venues. The Kipper Kids ceased performing in 1982.

[3] Johanna Went is an American performance artist centered in Los Angeles. She began her career in the late 1970s in the punk music scene, performing primarily in nightclubs. Her acts feature elaborate costumes created from found objects, which are often destroyed onstage. Her performances are noisy and hyperactive; she vocalizes in an abstract manner, similar to speaking in tongues.

[4] In the late 1970s, downtown-based Los Angeles artist Richard Newton began to make performances that directly addressed the downtown environment. In response to local street preachers, for example, he adopted the persona of “The Great and Glorious Reverend Ric,” standing on street corners, shouting “Oh Jesus” until he was hoarse.

[5] Formed in the early 1980s by Jack Marquette and Jim Van Tyne, Theoretical was a floating nightclub that presented alternative music acts, performance art, and video events. Marquette and Van Tyne were also involved in the selection of punk and art-related acts for the Anti-Club, Brave Dog, and other floating nightclubs as well. Theoretical events ceased in 1996.

[6] The Salton Sea, the largest lake in California, lies in the Colorado Desert in the southeast corner of the state. A byproduct of a 1905 flooding of the Colorado River, it is saline and heavily polluted from agricultural runoff. In the 1950s an attempt was made to develop the Salton Sea as a resort area, but most of the beachside developments were abandoned after flooding. Many of these structures still exist along the waterfront, ruined and encrusted with salt formations.

[7] *The Road Warrior* (1981), directed by George Miller, the second film in the *Mad Max* trilogy of postapocalyptic action films.

[8] 4-H Club is an American youth organization administered by the United States Department of Agriculture. The four H’s stand for: head, heart, hands, and health. Typically thought of as an agriculturally focused organization, the club now claims that its focuses are on citizenship, healthy living, science, and engineering and technology programs.

[9] *Two Fencers*, performed at the Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva.

[10] Leah, Margaret, and Kate Fox were sisters from Hydesville, New York, who in the mid-19th century found fame as mediums and helped popularize the Spiritualist religious movement. Ann Braude’s book *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) focuses on the history of Spiritualism and its relationship to the women’s movement.

[11] *From Here to Eternity* (1953), directed by Fred Zinnemann, based on the novel of the same name by James Jones. The film is a wartime drama set in Hawaii before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

[12] *Of Mice and Men* (1937), by the American author John Steinbeck. The novel’s tragic story centers on two homeless migrant workers. The first of several film adaptations was directed by Lewis Milestone in 1939.

[13] *Heart of Darkness* (1902), by the American author Joseph Conrad. This psychological novel recounts the experiences of an English boat captain in the Belgian Congo.