

Viola Angiolini, “Stranger Approaching at Bridget Donahue”, *Mousse Magazine*, October 15, 2019.

# MOUSSE



“Stranger Approaching”, installation views at Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019

Courtesy: Bridget Donahue, New York

## REVIEWS

# “Stranger Approaching” at Bridget Donahue, New York

by Viola Angiolini

Sometimes fables unfold without a cohesive, logical narrative, yet they can convey prophetic meanings. This is the case with *Stranger Approaching*, the show organized by Erin Leland at Bridget Donahue, New York, which brings together the work of twelve artists who adopt a scripting method in their practice. Redacted journals or memoirs cast their own creators as the protagonists of a performative *Bildungsroman* in which fate constitutes the ultimate guiding force. At other times, the sculptures, films, drawings, photographs, and texts presented in the show pay tribute to the revelations and unforeseen incidents found in fables, parables, or, more broadly, works of literature. As the title suggests, the exhibition is a stage for unexpected encounters.

In her acclaimed essay collection *The White Album* (1979), Joan Didion reflects upon the vertigo experienced in the chaotic and dissonant Los Angeles of the late 1960s, where “[e]verything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable.”<sup>1</sup> She recalls: “I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative’s intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical.”<sup>2</sup> In Didion’s essay, the stranger is the sudden twist in the plot: the breach through the logic of the narrative, the improbable turning into the probable. She writes: “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.”<sup>3</sup> As exquisite as they are painful, Didion’s words resonate with the works in *Stranger Approaching*, which, in different ways, invite the contingency of the process to dictate the plot instead of following it.

A diffuse red light guides the visitor up the stairs and inside the gallery. This rather extemporaneous rite of passage—upon entering the gallery, one discovers it originating from the glow of a neon installation by Jill Magid—announces a series of uncanny encounters with human, animal, and godly presences. A nocturnal rendezvous with two life-size human casts by George Segal, indeed titled *Encounter* (1996–98), occupies the center of the show. Solemn, ghostly, and impressionistic, these two figures are shown for the first time with the photographic backdrop that Segal shot in an unknown spot in downtown Manhattan, most certainly located in proximity to the gallery today. Around 1961 Segal began realizing his signature plaster sculptures taken from living models. He would select the subjects from his inner circle, instruct them briefly on the situation, and allow them to interpret the pose. Confined to an indeterminate limbo between reality and fiction, Segal’s dark figures look like shadows concealed in the obscurity. Hence, the nocturnal setting of *Encounter*

can be seen as a paradigm of Segal's somewhat blindfolded method. As the exhibition's press release suggests, when there is "no difference between one dark shape, and the dark shape of everything else... any direction [becomes] a route."<sup>4</sup>

The distance between the scripted idea and its realization is also central to the set of photographs, drawings, video, and process-related ephemera from the series *My death is pending... because* (1986–2017), by Mary Ellen Carroll. In 2005, determined to exhibit her father's Buick Riviera in an exhibition held at the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, Carroll decided to park the car on the entrance steps of the building when confronted with the impossibility of parking it inside—after arriving two weeks late to the opening. Years later, the final performance of the series, staged at a demolition derby, transformed the Riviera into a belated John Chamberlain crushed-car sculpture. A scrap of paper—more precisely a napkin—signed by Chamberlain before his death attests his intention to repurpose Carroll's car for the creation of a sculpture after the motorsport event. Like a Rube Goldberg machine, deliberately designed to accomplish a simple task in the most indirect and convoluted way, *My death is pending... because* embraces lateness as a medium for institutional critique.

Carroll isn't the only artist in the show weaving intimate memories and public introspection. Oto Gillen's *Times Square, August 2, 2017* (2019) is a silenced portrait of one of the most popular, yet alienating, areas of New York City. Isolated on a dark background, the photograph of the refractions of the city's lights on the surface of a soap bubble can be perceived as a deliberate withdrawal from a disorienting (and disoriented) reality. Similarly seeking isolation, Mark Kent's *Sleeping Rough* (1998–2009) witnesses the artist's itinerary through abandoned and squatted homes. Becoming the character he is pursuing by spending the night in the same gritty shanties he is documenting, Kent composes a constellation of coordinates that would later dictate the composition of his paintings. These photographs—originally meant as preliminary research for his paintings and therefore never shown before—are both diaristic and investigative in their intent, excavating private histories as the reflection of a broader social context.

To revisit personal memories as a way to celebrate the most human element of collective histories appears as a thread throughout the show—one that connects the works by Aura Rosenberg, Jill Magid, and Kevin Jerome Everson, as well as the extemporaneous lecture/performance by Gregg Bordowitz. In particular, Rosenberg's series of photographs matching the episodes narrated in Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* (1950) creates a contemporary reenactment of a text that is nostalgically rooted in its historical moment, pondering its burgeoning modernity and the passing of an era. What was, what might have been, and what is overlap in Rosenberg's photographs, leaving one to wonder if coincidences and recurrences necessarily need explanatory value to carry a meaning. Repetitions are particularly revealing in the self-published books of Ida Applebroog. The reiteration of the same simplified drawings turns these works into dysfunctional flipbooks in which the characters are imprisoned in an action or a situation. Exploring themes such as gender politics,

women's sexuality, and domestic violence, Applebroog's bitter cartoons point at patterns of behavior that, as their subtitle *A Performance* suggests, are as hypothetical as they are real.

The unsettling tone of Applebroog's drawings grounds the otherwise romantic—at times even whimsical—atmosphere evoked by the exhibition. The contrast emerges in the juxtaposition with those works referencing fables and fantastic stories. Such is the case of Lili Reynaud-Dewar's video *Lady to Fox* (2018), inspired by David Garnett's enigmatic short novel; Michael Almereyda's *The North Wind's Gift* (2018), a contemporary adaptation of Italo Calvino's folktale *Il regalo del vento tramontano* (1956); and Natalie Frank's paintings from the series *Island of Happiness—L'Île de la Félicité* (2017–19), inspired by the seventeenth-century fairy tale by Madame d'Aulnoy. Through those works, *Stranger Approaching* cherishes the naiveté and wistful quality of fables, as well as their intrinsic ability to meet our need to find meaning in metaphors and morals. Yet the transformation and the merciless wandering of their characters—echoed by the undetermined narratives explored by the other works on view—invite us to appreciate open-ended possibilities. Whether the artists are deviating from the script or merely improvising, there is much to gain by a willingness to let in and let go.

Artists: Michael Almereyda, Ida Applebroog, Gregg Bordowitz, Mary Ellen Carroll, Kevin Jerome Everson, Natalie Frank, Oto Gillen, Mark Kent, Jill Magid, Lili Reynaud-Dewar, Aura Rosenberg, George Segal.

1. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009): 41.
2. Didion, *White Album*, 13.
3. Didion, *White Album*, 11.
4. Press release for *Stranger Approaching*, Bridget Donahue, [https://bridgetdonahue-media-w2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/\\_Z7ftdJuShO43RtlDoUotg.pdf](https://bridgetdonahue-media-w2.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/_Z7ftdJuShO43RtlDoUotg.pdf)

at Bridget Donahue, New York  
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**“Stranger Approaching” curated by Erin Leland at Bridget Donahue**

September 8 to November 3, 2019

“When we finally got to the end of the road,” reads a fragment of a story dropped into the exhibition text, “it was pitch black. One shape loomed, and that was the shape of the person directly ahead, in which there was no difference between one dark shape, and the dark shape of everything else.” So who’s about to emerge from the shadows? Could be director Michael Almereyda, who remade *Hamlet* in 2000 with Ethan Hawke. Or French performance artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar, who wanders naked and painted through museum halls. Or Ida Applebroog, Gregg Bordowitz, Mary Ellen Carroll, Kevin Jerome Everson, Natalie Frank, Oto Gillen, Mark Kent, Jill Magid, Aura Rosenberg, George Segal; maybe all of them? “Stranger Approaching” brings together 12 storytellers working inside and outside of art to spin a great yarn from the night.