
AN INTERVIEW WITH MARNIE WEBER

The first thing that one notices about the films of Marnie Weber is the wonderful array of characters. The world she has created on screen is populated by anthropomorphic animals, living dolls, snowmen, witches and many familiar and unfamiliar monsters. These characters – which are created with a mix of fancy-dress-shop and home-made costumes – dance around, play in and explore the landscapes in which they find themselves.

Mostly shot on Super 8 and DV cameras, her short films feel almost like they could be filmed documents made in a fairytale land, the hazy lo-fi quality of the image evokes the atmosphere of afternoons of play captured by a roaming home-movie maker. The films have a delicate softness to them, they seem to drift along as if they have blown in on a summer's breeze and then fade out with the setting sun. They don't drive forwards with any kind of urgency or plot but instead they intoxicate you with their atmosphere and entice you to enter into their dream.

Even though there is no doubt that the creatures we are watching are artificial, after a short while of being immersed in these films one is cast under their spell, the conviction and sincerity with which they are made leaves you quite certain that this world is one hundred percent real. It is a reality in which we are reminded that play is a door to the imagination and the imagination is something that is alive, it is untamed and wonderfully unconcerned by the rules and logic of the outer world.

With their unique blend of the carnivalesque and the fairytale constructed in the spirit of a school play, Marnie Weber's films activate these imaginary worlds, they create an arena where we are permitted to access that dimension which was once so familiar to us in childhood, where fantasy and reality are one and where through creativity and play the world around us can be transformed.

In March we screened a selection of six of Marnie's short films at our showcase Film Panic Presents. The following interview was conducted via email.



Marnie Weber, *Destiny and Blow Up Friends*, 1995. Film Production Still. Courtesy of the artist.

How did you start making films?

I was primarily a performance artist in the '80s and began by making Super 8 films as backdrops to my performances. The films were another way to reflect different aspects of the character I was portraying. They would show the character's back stories, where they came from, much like personal landscapes. My first two films were based on the character of "Coquette, Circus Girl". One film is like a Super 8 home movie where Coquette leaves her elderly mother, who lives in an Airstream trailer, and heads out on a journey. The second is when Coquette innocently becomes part of a psycho-sexual circus and rides a giant stuffed pony. After completing these films I decided that they held up for viewing on their own, not just as backdrops. They became films that could be shown in galleries and have a life of their own.

Alongside making films you also make music, collages, installations and performances, how do these projects relate to each other? Do you see them as separate or as parts of a bigger whole?

They are all part of a greater narrative. That is what holds all the different mediums together while I am working. It would feel too chaotic, and I would be psychically scattered as if I were juggling too many things. So I start with a loose narrative as a foundation and the characters emerge and then I see where the ideas take me.

Your work is populated by monsters, humanoid animals and fantasy creatures, can you tell us about some of these characters and how they came about?

So many of my early characters were born from performing on stage. I would come up



Marnie Weber, *The Red Nurse and the Snowman*, 2000. Film Production Still. Courtesy of the artist.

with anything to avoid performing without a costume as a solo performer. When I was in a band during the '80s I was fine just playing away on my bass but when I started to do performance pieces all eyes were on me. I felt the need to hide or at least be more visually interesting. A costume wasn't enough. I wanted the songs and visuals to be character-driven as if written or created by the character. I started performing as an old woman, a circus girl, an outer space alien, a butterfly, a bunny, a deer, many other animals and birds, all the while considering the stage sets, props, songs and filmic backdrops. The shows grew more and more elaborate. Sometimes I would have guest musicians in costumes as other characters with props and elaborate stage sets. Many times I would have to make several trips in a truck loading and unloading at a venue. It began to feel masochistic. I would suffer from post show depression. I decided I should put more of my efforts into filmmaking as there would be more perma-

nence to the work. My interests in character development, music, costuming and narrative carried easily into the medium. I think my years of performing were invaluable in helping me understand how to tell a story in a filmic way.

Your films exist in a world inspired by mythology, fairy tales and dreams, what is it that draws you to this material?

I work with symbolism, allegory and metaphor and am more interested in what a character represents than what they actually are doing. Animals and creatures lend themselves perfectly to the creation of mythological tales and will quickly create feelings of empathy, curiosity, fear or revulsion in the viewer. Actors portraying humans bring psychological portrayals to a role whereas creatures seem to go deeper into more of a fantasy realm. Hopefully the viewer forgets that it's a human in the costume and can be swept

away into the story and feel as if they are entering a dream state. I do use humans in relationship with the creatures but they too are archetypes, such as witches, clowns, spirits and others to create another layer of fiction. I try to avoid reality as much as possible.

Some of your work seems to evoke the atmosphere of gothic horror but one thing that gives it a unique approach is that it has a more feminine attitude and perspective, I am thinking of the Spirit Girls in particular. The characters are not victims or tortured souls, in fact they seem to be having a lot of fun!

The Spirit Girls are a fictitious all girl band I created that lived in the '70s and died young and tragically, but came back as spirits to communicate from the beyond. Since they came from another reality, they feel as if they are visitors, they don't take themselves too seriously. However, they do certainly take their message and purpose quite seriously. I made four Spirit Girls films, had many gallery shows of Spirit Girls collages, sculptures and installations. I got together a Spirit Girls band. We wore spirit type costumes, had many, many shows and put out a record. I worked about five years on that body of work. The Spirit Girls transformed and grew emotionally in that time and then ultimately went back to wherever they came from.

Is the gothic and horror an influence?

They are very much so. The older gothic horror movies and books are a primary influence,



Marnie Weber, The Forgotten, 2001. Film Production Still. Courtesy of the artist.



Marnie Weber, The Ghost Trees, 2003. Video Still. Courtesy of the artist.

I don't like many contemporary horror films and I don't like gore. I love the juxtaposition of romance and fear that is found in older gothic works. It creates a dichotomy that is so seductive and frightening at the same time. The aesthetic is so dreamlike. I love that Mary Shelley created the first iconic monster in literature. Who better to have the experience to create a monster than a woman? We have struggles with power all the time.

Another influence for me in creating my films is the "Theatre of the Absurd". You can see it in

the simplicity of the stories and in the characters that are quite often searching for something and are at a loss existentially. There is also a dignified buffoonery to many of them that is typical of characters in absurdist theatre. They often have meaningless actions, like dragging props, getting nowhere, wandering aimlessly or searching for lost items or people. They are often trapped or in despair.

And what attracts you to this idea of ghosts and the afterlife?

I was researching the Spiritualist movement of the 1840s-1920s and was intrigued by women's involvement as spirit channelers. There were very few opportunities for women to speak publicly at that time so to be elevated in status by channeling spirits on stage seemed interesting to me coming from a performance art background. The prominent women spiritualists also supported women's suffrage so it was parallel to the women's movement in America. It is interesting that when women were given a voice to speak publicly they were channeling dead people. Whether it was theatricality or real doesn't matter to me. There is a great deal of discussion about "defrauding" the spiritualists but that isn't important, whether the women were really channeling or putting on a theatrical display both aspects are really powerful forms of self expression.

In terms of my life and work in relation to spirits I have always been intrigued by what I cannot see and am more interested in what I can feel or sense. I like to think there are spirits around me, sort of like imaginary friends who help me with my work and give me ideas or just send inspiration my way. When I'm done with this life I'll just enter into a different movie of my own creation and my friends and family will be there.

The music in all of your films has a very



*Marnie Weber, Songs That Never Die, 2005.
Film Production Still. Courtesy of the artist.*

particular feel to it, it is generally quite mysterious, soft and gentle, it evokes a peaceful state of mind which helps give this feeling that your films exist in a sort of dream-space slightly beyond the reality we live in.

That's very nice to hear. I think of them as soundscapes and am inspired by minimalism and ambience in my soundtracks rather than songs. However, I'm also not afraid of melody so there are lyrical moments that can carry the viewer along. I also love noise music so I work with that to create tension. I try for a surreal feeling to the music.

Can you tell us how you go about creating the music for your films and how you arrived at this style?

In the early days I would record everything on reel-to-reel eight-track tapes alone in



Marnie Weber, *The Sea of Silence*, 2009. Film Production Still. Photo by: LeeAnn Nickel.
Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery, London.

my basement, using a lot of different instruments. I experimented a great deal and figured out what audio went with the visuals later. I previously had gained a fair amount of experience in recording while putting out records (when I was in a band) and later with my solo releases. I took some recording classes. So it seemed natural to create my own soundtracks. Now I shoot the movie first, edit it and then do the recording afterwards to fit the images. I know more quickly what I'm looking for. It's so much about pacing and allowing space or silence or adding noise for tension, or music for emotion. It's like collaging with audio. Making soundtracks is one of my all time favorite activities.

In another interview you've said "I think that an independent movie represents the conscious mind, when an art movie is more like the unconscious mind", I think

this is such a fascinating way of looking at it and a way of understanding the role of the artist in society. Could you elaborate on this idea and why you think it's important for movies as an art form to express the unconscious?

Eraserhead was the first movie I saw which awakened in me the possibility that the subconscious can be the driving force in film-making. It was a real breakthrough. In an art film there is a suggestion of surreal imagery, visual triggers, silences and spaces in which the creator and the viewer can participate. An artist is a bit like a tour guide to an inner space. Instead of simply leading the audience through their work, they let go of their hand so they can discover what is inside during the experience. I do enjoy a good narrative but not when I'm told how to feel, I'd rather be moved by visual mystery.

So I found an old ranch called "Zorthian Ranch" in the foothills of Altadena and asked if I could shoot there. There was a great deal of stuff scattered and piled about, old cars, trailers, live animals, metal, piles and piles of stuff as well as a spooky house where the witch mother and daughter could live. It was perfect. We shot over a course of seven days off and on. We used a variety of cameras, both video and film, high def, 16 mm, Super 8, and an iPhone for take up shots. The entire film was considerably more difficult than my short films, in every possible way, yet very rewarding when the shooting was going well and of course when it was done.

The Day of Forevermore is about the relationship between a young girl played by your daughter and her witch mother played by you, what made you decide to cast yourself and your daughter in these roles? And how was it working together?

I wanted the young witch, Luna Crimson, and the old witch, Baba Muthra, to be different aspects of myself. I had played an old woman so many times it seemed natural to me. I slowly realized the character of the old witch was a bit like my mother. Then I thought the young witch began to emerge as myself as a young girl. I was always the naïve innocent. Colette had been studying acting and was in plays for years and I knew she could do it and there was the added bonus she looks like me when I was younger. The hard part was she was 13 when we started and 15 when we finished. Fortunately with a wig and make up she looks about the same. Colette was a huge help in writing the script and gave me a lot of good ideas. In fact she was the one who initially insisted I even have a script. She said actors need scripts. Who knew? I might have been harder on her than I was with the other actors. During the ritual scene I kept telling her to buck up, that sometimes actors work really long days and you have to have a lot

of energy. Turns out she had strep throat and was really sick and we didn't realize.

Ultimately I realized the film was like reliving aspects of my relationship with my mother but having my daughter play me and myself play my mother. The monologue that Baba does while riding off on the devil is my homage to motherhood, the intensity of the loving and the letting go.

Does making the films have any kind of therapeutic role for you? I am thinking in particular because you use yourself in the films and because you have talked about how they evolve from unconscious material. Much in the same sense as dreams do.

I figure out a loose narrative, make the storyboards, plan everything out with great detail and then shoot the film. During the filming I allow plenty of space for happy accidents or to simply try things. Afterwards when viewing the movie I can interpret what has happened in it. Sometimes it is absolutely uncanny how it reflects where I am in my life or where I have been. It is very mysterious and magical the way the unconscious works to send messages. It does become cathartic, movie making or dreaming can heal the psyche.

What projects are you working on next?

I'm working on a new psycho-biddy character (crazy old artist lady this time), a new narrative and a new body of work. There will be a movie but I am scaling way back. I am hoping to have a cast and crew of just one person this time, that would me.