THE WHITE REVIEW

[ONLINE ONLY]

INTERVIEW WITH MARNIE WEBER

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LOS ANGELES-BASED ARTIST MARNIE WEBER HAS SPENT HER CAREER WEAVING MUSIC, PERFORMANCE, COLLAGE, PHOTOGRAPHY AND PERFORMANCE TOGETHER INTO HER OWN PERSONAL FICTIONS.

Always heavily involved with the American alt-rock scene, Weber performed with The Party Boys and The Perfect Me in the 1980s before producing two solo albums, *Woman with Bass* in 1994 and *Cry for Happy* in 1996. She also designed the cover for Sonic's Youth's album, *A Thousand Leaves*. Her background is evidenced by her determination to incite a reaction from her audience.

More recently she established conceptual art rock group the Spirit Girls, which brings together 'a group of girls who died tragically in their youth and then come back to earth as spirits to perform in a band and to communicate through music'. This neo-gothic fairytale gave birth to several psychologically-charged artworks which disorientate the viewer. Emotional responses waver between happiness and sadness, amusement and tragedy, attraction and repulsion.

Mixing mainstream with counter-cultural elements, but also inspired by classic westerns and Surrealism, Marnie Weber's mythological world is populated with fantastic beasts and masked characters. Among the recurring figures are the clown, the doll and the bear. She describes them as friends or demons that follow her around. Her unique Surrealist lens is most trenchant in her videos, which she sees as 'moving dreamscapes'.

[Q]THE WHITE REVIEW — You once said using a handheld camera lends your work an awkwardness, a stumbling quality. Why do you use this technique? What are the aesthetic issues?

[A]MARNIE WEBER — I intentionally try to have a humble, homemade look to my films; it feels more genuine to me. The camera works in combination with the characters' movements, at times reflecting the consciousness of the character in vision, at times reflecting my consciousness, and at times the consciousness of the camera operator.

Sometimes, if we are lucky, the camera works by finding the mystical union of all involved. Since I act in the films rather than hold the camera myself, I have to rely on the magical moments of everything working in unison.

I also think that this approach allows the viewer to enter emotionally into my work. For example, I can address life's heavier issues, such as death, tragedy, birth without being so depressing. The film stock, the hand-held camera, the way of walking, the costumes, all of this combined with subtle humor, balances the dark and light. I like it when people say they don't know if they should laugh or cry when they see my films. Charlie Chaplin was a genius at this. He was making films in a very dark time in human history but gave people an escape while at the same time broaching issues such as poverty, loneliness, abandonment and loss with a sense of humor. He was also exploring movement in unison with the camera as if it were a dancing partner. On a different level, when the film is finished I think the homemade quality is a way of hopefully inspiring other people to make creative work in a way slick productions cannot. The work becomes a labour of love rather than a product of a huge production team.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Spiritualism is important to your work. Where did your interest in it come from?

AMARNIE WEBER — Spiritualism was an interesting development in American history. It was the first time people considered the possibility that God was within themselves, rather than a controlling being from above. It also grew during the same time, and in the same region of New York, as the women's movement. It was the first time women were on stage and 'given a voice', so to speak, and the voices that came out were those of channeled spirits. Spiritualism was an empowering movement.

I'm very much interested in the parallel between spiritualism and entertainment, which may have come from my many years as a performance artist. The Spirit Girls is a work of fiction, a conceptual art piece of my own creation. The narrative is this: a group of girls have died tragically in their youth and then come back to earth as spirits to perform in a band and to communicate through music. We wear costumes, masks, wigs and have props, projections and other characters who join in to create a musical experience that is consciously visual. It started as a theatrical rock show inspired by the progressive rock shows of the Seventies, which I loved in my youth. I went to see bands like early Genesis, King Crimson, Yes, Bowie and the Spiders and I thought to myself, 'Where are the women?' So the Spirit Girls were a way to go back and fill that niche for me. I am the initiator and director but when we are playing the music, it develops into more of a collaboration.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Throughout your work, animals are portrayed as cohabiting with dolls/humans. Is this intended to be utopian in any way?

AMARNIE WEBER — The animals act as alter egos, sometimes as spirit guides and also carry symbolism. Each animal represents something for me. For example, the bear is representative of power but also spirituality. In American Indian folklore, the bear is a symbol of spirituality and represents a delving into one's unconscious because the bear hibernates all winter as if involved in introspection. The bunny is an interesting character because it is not only a victim figure, but also a symbol of birth and fertility.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Fairytales, circus themes and freak shows are a common feature of your work. What's the attraction?

AMARNIE WEBER — I see the characters that inhabit those worlds as challenging themselves through the exploration of the darkest realms of their subconscious. That is very heroic to me. It is a place of transformation rather than placid existence.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You once compared your work to an exercise in acting class in which you put on a mask to express a true emotion, saying that through costumes and artifice, you are able to reach far greater depths of emotion in your art than can be reached showing everyday reality. How does this tie in to your use of masks?

AMARNIE WEBER — The current Spirit Girls masks are frightening because they don't have any expression. You can't read any emotions or what they are feeling. That way the audience has to create its own reading of the faces from within themselves, hopefully serving as a mirror. Humans need facial expression to feel comfortable and the faces seem strange and disturbing. You get used to it though.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — And what about your use of clowns? Where did the interest start?

AMARNIE WEBER — When I was a kid, I loved The Red Skelton Show. He performed as a poor downtrodden clown with a sad face. He would pull out his empty pockets and pretend to cry. This would in turn make me cry and say 'Poor him!' My mother would ask if she should turn it off but I would cry to have it stay on. It is this idea of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, but also the depth of emotion that clowns carry that appeals to me. Happy and sad clowns are like extensions of us. It is a cathartic release of our own pain to watch the humiliation of a clown. In my piece Giggle of Clowns, the group of clowns surrounds a flower-laden corpse, an effigy of the lead Spirit Girl. It is as if they lost their leader and were stuck in an existential quagmire of being cheerful. To be happy is a very dark journey.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Beside your Ghost Clown, there's a focus on veiled figures and faces? I am thinking here about Antonio Corradini's Dama Velata (La Purita) (1720/25).

AMARNIE WEBER — Yes, I love that veiled figure. It has been inspirational for me. In the marble ghost clown, the shape is that of both a ghost and a clown but it also appears shrouded, like the way people throw white sheets over furniture when they go away for a long time. It is symbolic of being present yet absent at the same time, and also of being frozen in time. The shrouded veiled figure carries a rich poetic mystery and I was planning on doing more in marble.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — You once said 'I'm not afraid of cute'. What was it you meant by this exactly?

AMARNIE WEBER — Cute, soppy, sentimental; they can all be extended, can make the work even darker in my opinion. It is as if one is saying 'everything is alright' while knowing it is not.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — And what about camp? Is camp important to you?

AMARNIE WEBER — Yes, I don't really fear going overboard or having people feel that it is too much. I think there is a place for simple beautiful formal work but since my interest lies in what is theatrical, the work tends to be layer upon layer of information and backstory combined, which creates more of a baroque quality. It can be misinterpreted as naivety but it doesn't bother me. At the core I know what is best for me and for my work.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Let's talk a little bit more about your collages. What is it that happens between two pictures when they are joined or juxtaposed?

AMARNIE WEBER — It creates a relationship that helps define or describe the other. It can also create drama or tension. It is very theatrical, much like creating a scene on an empty stage set.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — With your collages, do you recycle, appropriate or steal?

AMARNIE WEBER — Over the last five years I have been using primarily my own imagery, using myself or other people dressed up in costumes with painted backgrounds in theatrical settings. I wanted to see what would happen if I used nothing but my own source material. What came out was stranger than anything I might have found in the world and I was able to create something completely of my own. Earlier in my work I used found images from

magazines and books. I consider the act of image-borrowing as sort of a rescue or recycling. Saving an image from being forgotten or stuck between the pages of a book. It gives the image a second life and might be seen in a new context than its original by a very different group of viewers. That act of saving makes life itself seem important; it lends purpose.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Do you feel connected to the collage tradition?

AMARNIE WEBER — Yes I do. I study other artists' collages and I try to push the boundaries of what has been done in collage before. Art history is very important to me.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Barbara Kruger describes her work as 'more about pleasure, desire only exists where there is absence' and says that she is 'not interested in the desire of the image… but in suggesting that we needn't destroy difference.' Do you feel similarly about your own work?

AMARNIE WEBER — There is great power in longing. To raise questions with collage, create uncanny scenes that draw the viewer in, to make them wonder what is going on is much more powerful than to create an image that is complete, finalized or in essence 'dead'. The act of contemplation when viewing of an artwork is a beautiful moment.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Elad Lassry says there is something ironic when appropriating contemporary images. What do you think of that with respect to your own work?

AMARNIE WEBER — I only think of my work in terms of ironic when there is humour. I tend to be very sincere. I also don't appropriate contemporary images.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Do you try to treat all pictures democratically?

AMARNIE WEBER — No some are more emotionally charged and special.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — What is left from the original context of the images you uses?

AMARNIE WEBER — From the ensemble they belong to? Very little these days. I used to leave a lot more. I am increasingly trying to use all my own images and still make it a collage. I like to be in my own world, not referencing popular culture or social concerns.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — What do you think about Barthes' statement 'whatever the sense: things don't matter, but the place of the things does'?

AMARNIE WEBER — I think the Barthes quote is talking about how it adds definition. 'Things', or objects included in a collage, are always metaphors for more profound subjects. A moth is a symbol of decay whereas a butterfly is a symbol of transcendence.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Are your collages 'metaphors of fraternity' as Jean-Luc Godard puts it? Would you say they were metaphors of dependence, or a love encounter?

AMARNIE WEBER — I would say they are closer to a love encounter. A labour of love.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Are your collages assonant or dissonant, do they have similar or antinomian associations?

AMARNIE WEBER — Visually they have assonance and can be pleasing to look at but they are dissonant in that there feels like there is something not right. An uncanny strangeness. Antinomian.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — What do you think Keith Tyson meant when he said: 'The world with which I am confronted is a complex dynamic, mutant, and speeded up; and if I am somehow "honest" then my art must reflect it, and try to resist a modernist inheritance'.

AMARNIE WEBER — There is an honesty in being non-ironic that can be confrontational. Many artists hide behind contemporary formalism, you aren't sure if it is a true expression of where their heart is.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Does collage talk about fragility?

AMARNIE WEBER — Yes things decay and fall apart. It makes us seem small compared to all that is out there. Collage is a resurrection of an image's death.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Are your collages synecdoche?

AMARNIE WEBER — Yes, they refer to a larger overall narrative.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — Let's move on to your use of the podium. What does it allow you to achieve, and what aesthetic forms are at stake when using such a form, such space?

AMARNIE WEBER — I never use a simple white podium, it seems trivial and carries a false importance. It is ok if used ironically. If a work needs height I create my own base that works conceptually with the piece. For instance, the podiums for the large pull animals are meant to look like toys. The podium creates an artificial importance to the work, but it is also a practical tool.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — The plinth, the pedestal, and the podium are areas of power, competition, emphasis and authority. Why do you use this typology? Can we move away from these principles?

AMARNIE WEBER — I prefer to think of an installation as a theatrical set and a podium just becomes another prop thereby diminishing its power. It gives definition, but it is a false power.

QTHE WHITE REVIEW — How do you avoid fetishism and still work with the podium? Is it possible?

AMARNIE WEBER — I think the way to avoid the fetishism is to not use square white cubes as a podiums but to consider different ways to present the work and make it all part of the piece.