

Interview with Marnie Weber

By AMY GREENBERG



Marnie Weber is first and foremost, an artist with the right kind of spook. The Los Angeles-based artists' discerning eye for the esoteric and razor-sharp musings on death, life, gender, and spectacle infiltrate every aspect of her work. Born originally in Connecticut, she studied at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA before receiving her B.A. from University of California, Los Angeles. At once a performance artist, filmmaker, musician, and visual artist, Weber reminds us that tales of the morbid and fanciful offer us the breadcrumbs of narrative that lead us to encounter the more subversive part of ourselves. And while her modes of expression are dynamic, each medium Weber works in ultimately offers the viewer an all-encompassing experience— an at once tender and absurdest celebration of the rather freakish tenacity of imagination.

Born originally in Connecticut, Weber studied at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA before receiving her B.A. from University of California, Los Angeles. She currently works and resides in Los Angeles where she is working on upcoming projects.

Much of your work is interested in repetitive imagery, and a desire to create strong female personae. Why would you say that is?

I would say it is more repetitive subject matter rather than imagery as I don't repeat actual images as I am very much committed to the idea of an art work as a unique piece. For instance certain animals, bunnies, bears, pigs, and crows pop up a lot. I use masks, costumes, the female form, monsters, and ghosts in combination with the animals to create my own symbolic fictional world. A strong female

persona emerges from this world of symbolism much like a lead actress in a play. The props and characters around her help define who she is. They act as adjectives. Sometimes the female lead is put in forlorn, vulnerable situations in order to make a transformation to empowerment. It is more interesting to have change and growth in a character.

Would you consider it a particularly feminine impetus to connect with a symbolic past?

A strong female persona emerges from this world of symbolism much like a lead actress in a play. The props and characters around her help define who she is. They act as adjectives. Sometimes the female lead is put in forlorn, vulnerable situations in order to make a transformation to empowerment. It is more interesting to have change and growth in a character. I think there are some male artists who delve into the creative unconscious to find and utilize male heroic imagery, for instance Matthew Barney. Others such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley have explored the emasculated male, a form of anti-hero, in their work. It really depends on the artist and what they are interested in, male or female.

So has the woman as symbolic subject defined how we understand the woman now?

I think there has been a much greater understanding of the way images of women are used throughout art history [as a reflection of] their current position in society. Cindy Sherman's work is a great example of this. People have gotten more aware of the ability of feminine power to be expressed through imagery. It then in turn is expressed in the art market. One need only to walk through the Louvre and see painting after painting by male artists of women sprawled naked in languishing positions to see how far we have come. We can see how the use of the female nude has changed considerably over time, issues of objectification which entered the dialogue in the 60's have shaped how women are viewed as symbolic subjects and changed how they are represented. In the art world anyway.

What are some of your upcoming projects?

I am working on a new narrative involving a fictionalized religious sect who reside in pastoral, idyllic farmlands outside of society. Their beliefs are derived from the Amish, Mennonites and the Quakers. Their practices of simplicity and forgiveness are at conflict with their dark side as they encounter witches, demons, and creatures of the underworld who reside in their subconscious.

Stories, the origin of your characters and their worlds, seem to be so much a part of your work. Do you think a work resonates more when it resonates with a collective history?

Yes, absolutely.

What about a collective fictional history, like fables, folktales, and myths?

These fables, fairy tales and myths cross cultures and reside in our collective unconscious, they shape who we are as people. They show us the dark and the light and as children they taught us right from wrong. They are in our dreams and for me I am lucky enough to have them be a large part of my everyday waking life.

Who are The Spirit Girls as you originally envisioned them?

The Spirit Girls were a group of girls who died young and tragically before their band became successful so they came back to as ghosts to perform music and spread their message to those who could hear them.

Has their meaning changed with time?

I initially thought of it as a rock-opera which I staged and it was so successful and interesting to me I continued with them for five years. I did many more performances, four Spirit Girls movies, countless collages of the Girls in their surreal landscapes and a full length cd of their music. Last November I put them to final rest at a large performance and gallery showing in a huge, beautiful cathedral-style historic mausoleum here in Altadena near my studio. We played music in the main hall amongst the crypts and had monsters walking through the graveyard. People dressed as grave digging ghosts gave historical tours. It was an experience of a lifetime for me. The meaning of the Spirit Girls really didn't change, they were always the musical girls trying to express themselves. They had to find their way through the world of the mortals, getting caught up in activities less than spiritual in nature and thereby learning and growing before departing back to the spirit world.

What for you constitutes a successful reception to your work, specifically your live performances?

[When] people seem happy and enthusiastic. But the best response is sheer awe. I like people to see something different. My performance practice has highly influenced my work in other mediums, I do consider an audience when I make my movies and in my collages I like to create a moment of psychological tension, as if the audience just walked in on a scene from a play and they don't quite know what is going on but they get the feeling.

Do you think an artist's initial inspiration can ever completely translate in the viewer's reaction?

I think everyone comes away from an art work or performance getting exactly what they needed from it. My job is to create the moment.

How did art school inform your current aesthetic and your artistic ambitions?

As with art schools it is really the teachers who were an influence or inspirational. My three most memorable teachers were: Chris Burden for performance, George Herms for sculpture and Alexis Smith taught collage. It is important to have real world working teachers in art schools. Mine were very inspirational as role models. Alexis taught me the boundless possibilities of collage. Chris Burden was influential for one simple statement he said which stuck with me. I don't remember the specific words but he said something to the effect that if you have an idea that doesn't go away and you don't carry it out you aren't being honest with yourself. I still use that philosophy today.

Were you encouraged to pursue narrative like the kind in your current work?

There wasn't the narrative vs. anti-narrative discussion that exists today and so it really wasn't an issue. I was working with narrative then and there were no objections. I wouldn't say there was encouragement either.

While I would say much of your work involves the esoteric and the spiritual, why now do you feel compelled to create a more linear religious dialogue with this new project?

I didn't mean for it to come across as linear, perhaps I over explained it. It is really the characters struggling with their unconscious which are never linear.

How do you navigate the art world as a contemporary female artist?

To extend the metaphor, I row my little row boat till my arms hurt trying not to get knocked over by the big yachts zooming by. Self respect and the respect of other artists is really what is most important to

me. One can go crazy looking at the numbers of women vs. men in exhibitions, galleries and differentiations in the art market. I just do the work and don't think about positioning myself.

It's really interesting to know that The Spirit Girls had to have a kind of resurrection to be heard. Speaking of the symbolic woman, do you think this idea relates to the role of the woman as artistic producer?

Does she have to undergo some major (either exterior or interior) transformation to be reckoned with by society? That is an interesting question. There is a great deal of energy in anger. Many times anger creates transformation, whether the anger is repressed or expressed, it has to come out or we can get sick and die. Perhaps that and the knowing we only have a certain amount of time left creates a transformation to be reckoned with.

In the wave of the world's recent political and social upheaval, do you think art that's escapist in its tendencies is too reckless for these times or more important than ever?

It is important to break new grounds in every walk of life and profession. Medicine needs to advance, political situations need upheaval and resolution, helping people socially with each cause needs to advance, music needs to change, inventions need inventing. By pushing boundaries and expanding the history of art we as artists are in our own way contributing to the overall change in the world. If everyone does their part we can all grow. It is vibrational. One doesn't have to be making art about politics. Artists just have to push the boundaries of what has come before them.

I wonder how The Spirit Girls tragic deaths, and even the tormented religious sect in your upcoming project, would relate to the countless who have lost their lives in recent weeks in Japan, or those who've struggled against their own governments in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt.

My stories about people learning about themselves are just small stories in the big picture. A personal tragedy hurts as much to an individual anywhere in the world. Pain is a great leveler and it makes us human.