

Art

Marnie Weber's weird, weird world

Marnie Weber's new short film, 'The Sea of Silence', features all-female ghost band The Spirit Girls and their life-size ventriloquist dummy doppelgängers. **Helen Sumpter** peers into the bizarre world of the LA-based artist and musician

'The Sea of Silence' is your third film with the five Spirit Girls. Who are they?
'As a teenager I loved theatrical prog-rock groups like Yes and Genesis, but there were never any women in those bands. So I invented the five Spirit Girl characters as the masked and mute ghosts of a fictional girl band who never made it because they had all somehow died tragically together. In this film they finally get their voices through ventriloquist dolls.'

Your films are carnivalesque and dreamlike but also quite spooky...
'I'm interested in the connection between spirituality as performance or entertainment, as well as in its relation to sexuality. Some of the earliest spirit mediums, such as the nineteenth-

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century Fox Sisters in America, wore tight nightgowns and had their hands tied up so that they couldn't hide any tricks – there was a real fetishising of the female figure going on.'

Why do the girls have their own dolls?
'Ventriloquist dolls were originally used to channel spirits but in this film it's reversed because the dolls are doing the channelling as the manifestations of their human selves. Because the dolls are actually slightly larger than life-size we had to use a professional ventriloquist dummy wrangler who taught us how to manipulate them properly.'



Swine, women and song Marnie Weber's collage 'Comforting Pig' (above) and one of The Spirit Girls (below)

You also perform in a Spirit Girls band. How do the art and music relate?
'I was in rock bands before I went to art school. My dad was an art historian so I had to rebel in other ways! The art/music crossover has always been an easy one for me because there are costumes, visuals and music involved in both. But there is a separation because The Spirit Girls began as a narrative film, only becoming a band much later on. Before them, I made work about a group of socially outcast women exiled to an island and bred with the local rodents to become a super-race, known as *Femme Rodentia*.'

Will you be playing any gigs in London?
'Not on this occasion. I almost played at the ICA in 1980 when I dropped out of art school and came to London with The Party Boys. Our gig didn't happen because we got miserably beaten up by another band. There was ska and punk going on and it seemed quite a violent time when you'd get beat up for having the wrong look. Being American we had all the wrong looks combined!'

Your exhibition includes sculptures and collages as well as the film...
'The Spirit Girl dolls are there, along with some human/animal figures that also relate to the film. The collages are more fantastical and set the scene of the landscape or dreamscape of the film. The animal figures are another

recurring theme and I always think of them as Jungian aspects of myself – for example, the bear is power, the bunny is innocence. I'm not sure where the water buffalo comes from, though. In the film he's just laughing inappropriately.'

Will The Spirit Girls return for a fourth film?
'I don't know. At the end of "The Sea of Silence" they walk into the waves as an act of finally letting go of their bodies, so maybe they've now been transformed into something else.'

Marnie Weber's 'The Truth Speakers, The Sea of Silence' is at Simon Lee until Oct 7 (see Mayfair to Sloane Square).

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