

Moyra Davey's films, photographs and writing are a sustained meditation on her family, literary influences, travels and environment *by Quinn Latimer*

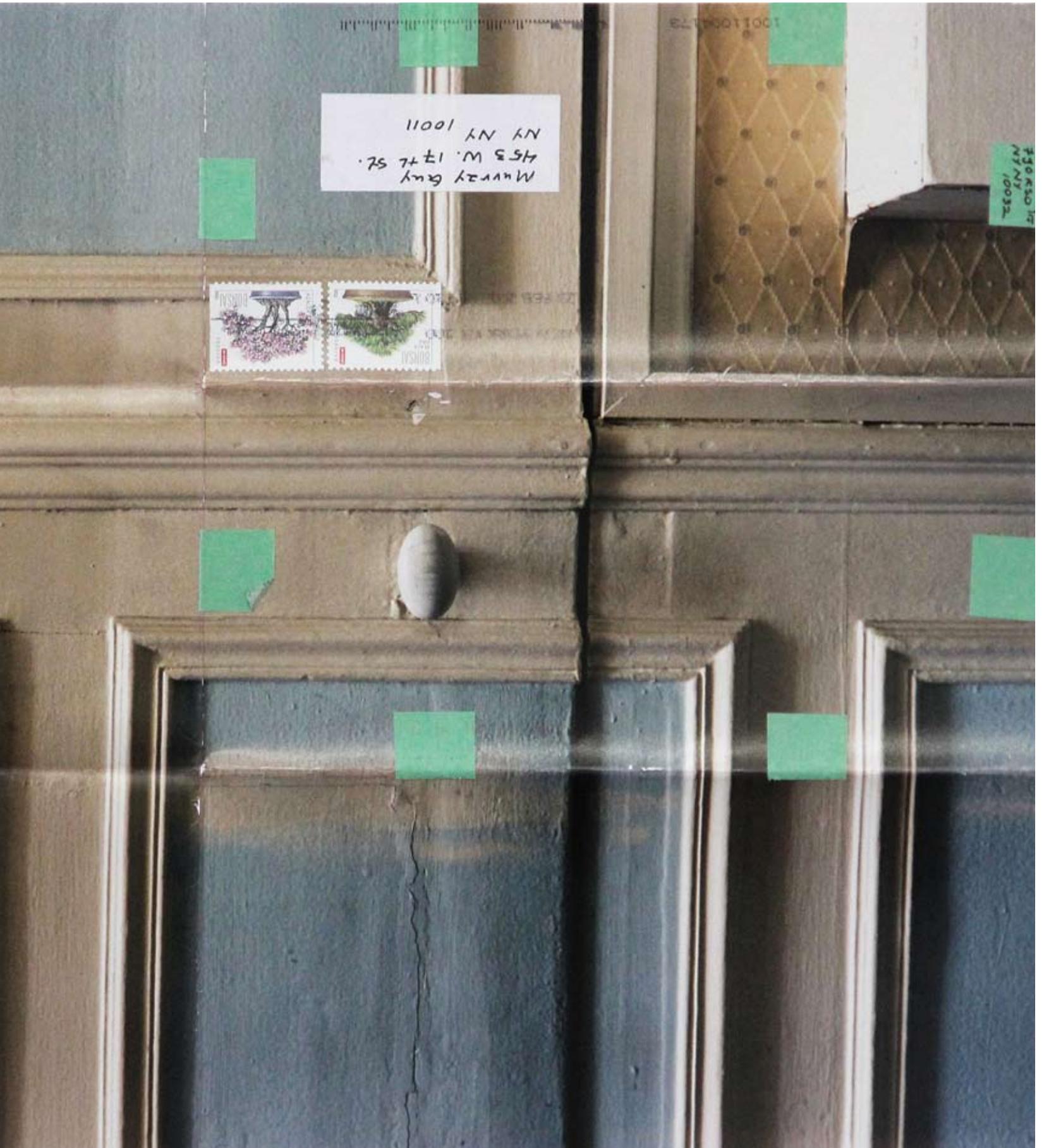
Moyra Davey lives and works in New York, USA. She has been the subject of solo exhibitions at greengrass, London, UK, in 2011 and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, USA, in 2012. Her work was recently included in 'New Photography 2011' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and is currently on view in a solo exhibition at Murray Guy, New York, until 6 May, as well as in the 2012 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, until 27 May.

From the series 'Hair of Allegra',
2012, 12 c-type prints, postage, tape and ink,
each: 30×44 cm

'Paris of the mind is preferable to the real thing,' wrote Moyra Davey last year, in her beautifully elliptical essay 'The Wet and the Dry' (published by Paraguay Press in its pamphlet series 'The Social Life of the Book'). For Davey, such a sentence (and sentiment) is not peculiar, nor patently rhetorical. It speaks, instead, to her larger practice, in which the examined life might be said to be her very *métier*. For all her work – photographic, filmic or textual – is necessarily mediated by and predicated on a profound and preferred interiority. Yet paradoxically, in Davey's *oeuvre*, the thinking, desirous mind manifests itself by an exterior corollary: the memory-fastening frame of the photograph; the roving, inquisitive eye of the film camera and its attendant voice-over; the starkly intimate address of the essay. Likewise, her subjects – so many interiors – assume the stance of relic-like repositories of psychological or physical interiority. See the 'images' she records again and again by camera or writing. The rooms filled with cultural and quotidian clutter: dusty books and beds to read them on; paper- and



Woman of Letters





- 1
My Necropolis,
2009, video still
- 2
Glad, 1999, c-type print,
51×61 cm
- 3
Two Streaks, 1999,
c-type print, 51×61 cm
- 4
Les Goddesses, 2011,
HD video still
- 5
Copperhead #29
from the series 'Copperhead',
1990,
c-type print 61×46 cm



volume-strewn desks; records and the scaffolding-like shelves that archive them; sun-spotted floors carpeted with portfolios of photographs; windows in which light leans in and the world is kept out.

And yet despite this emphasis on the role and rights of one's interiority, Davey's 'The Wet and the Dry', and her practice as a whole, concerns itself just as much with external daily life. Through a careful and causal limning of the diaries, travelogues and letters that she favours for their diurnal intimacy and radical directness of address, written by Marguerite Duras, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and others; through the parsing and paralleling of Davey's own sibling- and addiction-strewn family in Canada; and through a caustic description of her stays in Paris, Davey's essay explores the vagaries of youth, family, poverty and society, and the impact these external pressures have on one's ability to make art and meaning – or, to construct one's very interiority. Taking this dialectic further, and ever more allusively, Davey's text also explores the dialectical nature and relative creative utility of the real versus the rehearsed, *vérité* versus the studio, the document versus the fictive, photography versus literature. And it is this last tension (not quite binary, not quite not) that forms the very foundation of Davey's strangely formal – in sensibility if not in content – and deeply affecting body of work.

For the past two decades, the New York-based artist has adroitly traced the literary quality of photography, and levelled a distinctly literary attitude towards it, often through the lens of the lucid writing on the subject by the Roland Barthes/Walter Benjamin/Susan Sontag trifecta, for each of whom Davey demonstrably feels great admiration and kinship. More than simply explicitly quoting or examining the ideas of these critic-personages in her own writing and films (which she deftly does), or implicitly employing their theories in her photographs (which also occurs), Davey appears to assiduously glean their exemplary critical and personal writing for examples of how one lives (and lives through) the creative, conscious, imponderable, ever imperfect life. Deeply humane, effortlessly sympathetic and entirely committed, these writers and their acute sensibilities are meridians to which Davey's gaze, it seems, is irrevocably directed.

To that end, she has explored the photographic quality of literature through her interest in the fragmentary and provisional letters of the aforementioned critics and favourite writers. She has slipped the concerns of the writer/reader into that of photography, the concerns of photography into that of literature, and in so doing pressed patiently past the borders of both. See the syntactical constructions of the titles of her texts, most often published as pamphlets or books autonomous from her exhibitions: 'The Problem of Reading', 'Notes on Photography & Accident', 'Mother Reader'. The grace notes of the bygone literary philosopher, and of the un-Common Reader to whom such titles



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might be directed, point to Davey's primary influence: a certain kind of literary attitude moving (lyrically, penetratingly, slowly, ever humanely) over its areas of concern.

Davey's photographs of the quotidian, meanwhile, find the artist imaging the very literary preferences of both herself and writers like Barthes, who noted, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), his affectionate partiality to the 'petty details of daily life' that fill biographies and travelogues. As Davey cogently writes in 'The Problem of Reading' (2003): 'The question always conjures up an image.' Language intrinsically generates images, and vice-versa. Perhaps this attention to, and blurring of, the limits of a medium pertain to the fact that Davey's first choice — photography — was on its last analogue legs when she began practicing it. Born in Toronto in 1958, she began taking photographs in the late 1970s, by which time the extant field was soon to be displaced by nascent digitization. If we speak often of painting after the fact, so too Davey's work reminds us that analogue photography and film are themselves lingering dinosaurs with a sepia gaze.

After attending university in Montreal and California, Davey enrolled in the Whitney Independent Studio Program in New York in 1989, thereafter becoming associated with American Fine Arts and its stable of now-canonical artists embracing institutional critique. Yet the politics of representation that soaked the 1980s art world, with its delineations of the public/private body, did not leave Davey untouched.

Her earliest staged images of siblings and self are sexually ambiguous. Genders seem fluidly undefined (short hair, mostly flat chests); nakedness does not conjure pat eroticism or mortality but a cooler, darker kind of punk-familial vulnerability. Even then, Davey's work was mediated by the thinking mind married to the corporeal body. 'To do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations,' wrote Benjamin. And in these personal images, Davey would appear to agree. See her 1979 series, in which her siblings — identically outfitted in either white tank tops or striped shirts — crowd the frame against a white wall, with lithe bodies and occluded expressions, as in the spare new wave band portraits or early music videos they conjure. And yet, as Davey notes in 'The Wet and the Dry', that exact 'abandonment is precisely what would begin to take place' in her images from the mid-'80s and extending for a decade, until her subjects 'constituted little more than the dust on [her] bookshelves'. See the nearly abstract *Film 1* (1999), with its leaning, vertical stripes of discoloured books, a horizon line of dust at their base, soberly taking their measure.

Yet her photographs did not immediately go faceless. There is the 'Copperhead' series (1990), a kind of geographical counterfeiter with its microscopic look at American pennies, the most useless of US currency prided with the image of the most celebrated US president: Abraham Lincoln. Davey's series recast economic crisis and Reagan-era greed as furtive, wrecked landscapes.

Slowly, however, even Lincoln was phased out. Davey's now-fundamental colour photographs of book, record and videotape spines, silver shelving units and fluorescent light fixtures, a clipping-adorned fridge and analogue radio receivers, were made as the 1990s and 2000s wore on. In these beautifully imagined and nuanced images of domestic technologies on obsolescence's verge, the artist's interest in temporality







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From the series 'Hair of Allegra',
2012, 12 c-type prints, postage, tape and ink,
each: 30 x 44 cm

HISTORY
OF
A SIX WEEKS TOUR
THROUGH
A PART OF FRANCE,
SWITZERLAND, GERMANY, AND HOLLAND

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and its victims and vicissitudes asserted itself. Oddly spectral and nearly bygone as their subjects are, the photographs do not feel nostalgic, though they raise the idea.

And it is to this idea – as trope, as fact – that Davey turns in *Fifty Minutes* (2006). The first in a series of essayistic films, the moving-image work mines her elegant, vignette-driven texts for halting voice-overs, her photographs for film stills, and her home and body for location and star. Opening with the turning of pages, the film takes the form of an analysis of 50 minutes of disclosure. The anxiety of post-9/11 New York rivers into a monologue on nostalgia's relative qualities. 'In critical circles, nostalgia has a negative, even decadent connotation,' she recites, noting its origin in the Greek *nostos*, or 'return home', and *algos*, or 'pain'. Likewise, its German incarnation is *Heimweh*, or 'home-ache'. Both meanings are predicated on an inevitable return (home), where the pain of origination, and thus living, and of the human condition as a whole, is located. Davey's own plumbing of her domestic interior and origins would seem to concur. Yet if nostalgia in the contemporary art world is glossed with the superficial – with the making of suffering something materially beautiful, often via the camera – it is against this, particularly in her often deliberately artless films, that Davey also turns. That a restless, weird beauty results anyway, *sans* sentiment, is a measure of her films' significance.

Take the spectral, devastating short *Hujar/Palermo* (2010), in which Davey flips through the pages of Peter Hujar's famous book *Portraits in Life and Death* (1976), finally stopping on a fragment from Sontag's introduction, in which the critic notes, 'Life is a movie. Death is a photograph.' Or the more epic *Les Goddesses* (2011), which gleans or 'cannibalizes' (as is Davey's wont and word) her essay 'The Wet and the Dry' for a meditation on the Shelleys, her own family, the natural world and the nature of writing and photography. As in most of her

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Les Goddesses,
2011, HD video stills

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Jane,
1979, silver gelatin print,
51×41 cm

6
White tanks,
1979, silver gelatin print,
51×41 cm



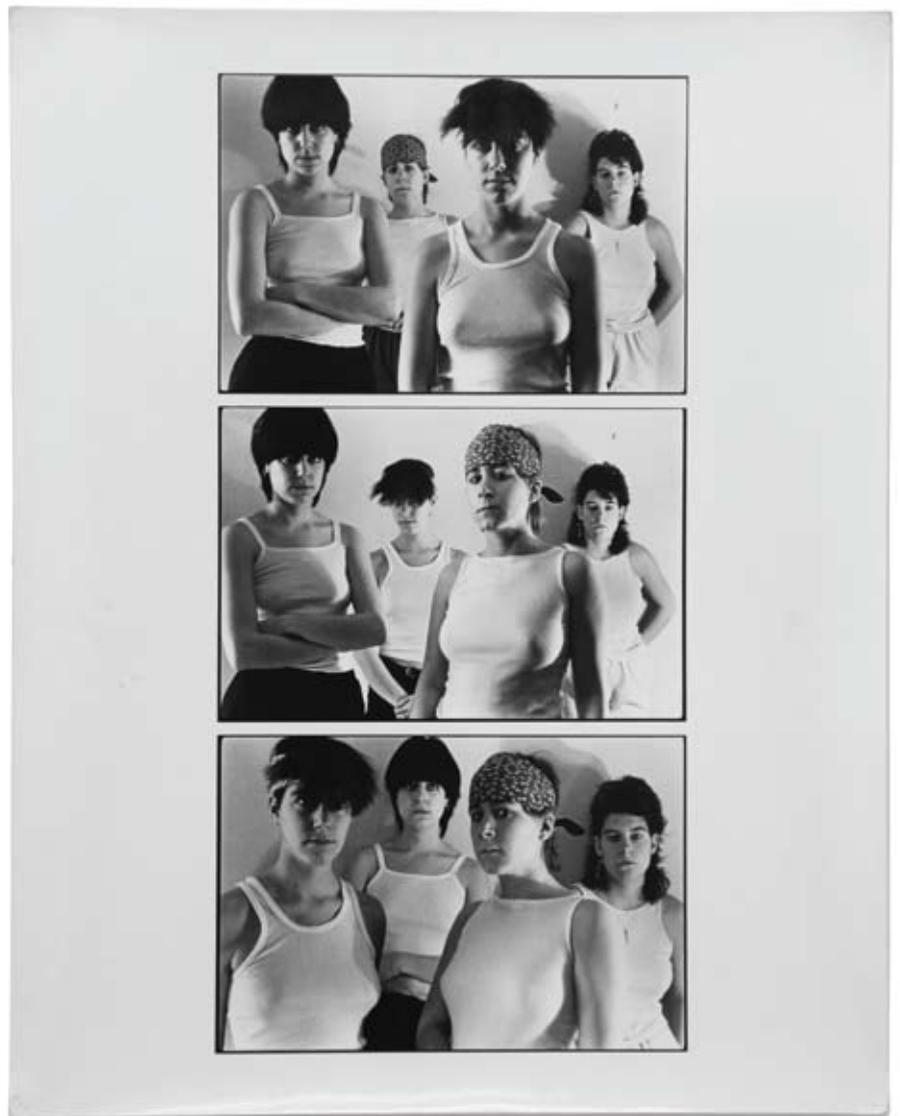
FRIEZE VIDEO
The author presents a film about Moyra Davey
on frieze.com



5

moving-image works, the camera is either provisionally fixed on the pages and paragraphs of a book or on Davey herself as she wanders the corners of the rooms of her studio and apartment, haltingly reciting passages from her essays from memory, disrupting the elegance of her writing with the intrusion of imperfect memory. Or the camera itself wanders, over the grey views of highways and parks from her windows. In *My Necropolis* (2009), however, one of the more powerful works of art of recent times, the camera takes in neither Davey herself nor the views from her windows. Instead, it roves over the famed cemeteries of Paris and the sculpted-book-laden tombs marking their lauded artist and writer residents, as well as a number of her intimates, as she methodically asks them to explicate a certain ambiguous passage in a letter Benjamin wrote to Gershon Scholem.

In it, Benjamin notes the poverty of his present surroundings, then remarks that viewing the clock outside his window is ‘a luxury’ it is difficult for him to do without. Intimations of mortality, persecution and writing itself echo through the line, stirring Davey and her interviewees forward. Describing the beautiful, formal quality of Benjamin’s original German, one woman notes, ‘It very much comes out of a culture of writing letters.’ And suddenly Davey’s own work is conjured: her *oeuvre* a kind of epistolary practice, soaked with the past and stoked by the sublime terror of the present and future, of the anxiety of one’s creative and daily work, of its possible error or extinguishing. In ‘The Problem of Reading’, Davey suggests that such letters as Benjamin’s, with their unconsciously recorded passages, ‘allow us to insert ourselves into the scene, to feel interpolated by the text, perhaps a little in the way we are hooked by the *punctum* of a photograph’. And here we land on Davey’s own working method. If Barthes’s *noème* is the ‘that-has-been’ of photography, which instantly turns the present into the past, then Davey’s works alter that equation by shifting the focus from



6

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memory to creative utility – the future, in other words. Her practice turns the present not into the past but into something patently generative.

Thus emerges the disquieting conflict of Davey’s body of work: that of the productive creative life versus that of the receiver, the writer versus the reader. For each, time is a recorder of work or of worth or of both. Uniquely, this anxiety about creative utility finds form in Davey’s own productions. Each of her works is auspiciously productive; each is the kind that might inspire its spectators to reflect or strike out on his or her own. (See, for example, the urge by critics when writing about Davey’s work to adopt her unique literary style – always the sure sign of an exceptional writer. See her domestic interiors, empty of people, which invite the spectator’s body in.) Yet the generosity of her works, their beckoning to the spectator-maker, is paradoxically the result of

their basic reticence. Davey’s works subtly withhold their narrative or argument even when ostensibly delineating it. In this, they call the spectator to construct his or her own. Goethe’s ‘need to double his life in writing’, as Davey puts it in ‘The Wet and the Dry’ is also her own, and she passes it on to the spectator. In her photos, films and texts, reflection is both light and surface. Unlike so many contemporary artists whose work comes saddled with a distinctly narrow art-history course, this artist’s work gifts her audience with a wider kind of intelligence. If Davey’s work too comes with a syllabus, it is an altogether different sort. ♦♦

Quinn Latimer is an American poet and critic based in Basel, Switzerland. Her writing appears in Artforum, frieze and The Paris Review, among others, and her first book, Rumored Animals, was just published by Dream Horse Press.