

# ARTFORUM

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## Moyra Davey

MURRAY GUY

Toronto-born photographer—or, to use a term more common north of the forty-fifth parallel, Photoconceptualist—Moyra Davey has been quietly at work in New York for more than twenty years, garnering a strong fan base among fellow artists, more recently coming to broader attention. Her recent show in New York, irresistibly titled “Spleen. Indolence. Torpor. Ill-humour.,” was essentially a meditation on the presence and absence of the human figure before the camera, articulated in three parts: the approximately hour-long HD video *Les Goddesses*, 2011 (which was also screened in April as part of the Whitney Biennial); an untitled group of black-and-white photographs of the artist’s five sisters, dating from 1979; and two groups of new photographs. The first, *Subway Writers III*, 2012, depicts people on the New York City subways engaged in the act of writing; the second, *Trust Me*, 2011, is a sequence of still lifes and landscapes—a stack of envelopes on a radiator, a medicine cabinet—in which the human form appears only once, almost as another still-life item. Bearing stamps, address labels, and tape, the photographs have been folded and sent through the mail, those in *Trust Me* to the writer Lynne Tillman, who has appended selections of her writing across the sequence.

*Les Goddesses* is woven around an essay by Davey, “The Wet and the Dry,” a text revolving around two axes. One has to do with the writer Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her daughter Mary Shelley, and the English Romantic poets, while the other concerns not only the artist herself and her



Moyra Davey, *Les Goddesses*, 2011  
still from a color  
video, 61 minute:

relationship with her family—above all her five sisters—but also her struggle with MS. (A homeopath prescribed two substances for her treatment, she tells us, which both turned out to be chemicals used in photography.) We see Davey wandering through her apartment—periodically there are shots of the winter cityscape through the window—as she listens with earphones to a recording of the essay and attempts to repeat it as it plays. The result of this self-ventriloquism is a peculiar distance between voice and text. Each word she pronounces is like a snapshot of a word we can't hear. When she says, or rather repeats, the line “my fragmented story came out rather flat and monotone,” she seems to be describing not only what we are actually hearing but also an aesthetic of neutrality in which passion is authenticated by the artist's ability to studiously reflect on it by mediating its expression.

At one point, we see her blowing the dust off her books into the air, as if this dispersal of what has accumulated around her library was an essential gesture of her art. Amid citations of authors such as Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Isak Dinesen, she ruminates over the photographs she took of her sisters more than thirty years earlier, the ones from which the prints displayed in the next room were chosen. Dressed in white tank tops or striped T-shirts, all very graphic, the astonishingly self-possessed young women look like the perfect feminist post-punk band—the one whose album I might have liked to put on after wearing out the grooves on my Slits and Raincoats records—rather than a family. Their subsequent lives, we gather from the narration, reflect uncertainties and regrets, the incipient signs of which one looks for in vain in the photographs. For Davey, reflecting on life, literature, and the image constitutes a single process, but it's one that opens out as well as reflects inward. “On the subway downtown on the way to the New York Public Library, in search of Mary Shelley's diary,” she recites in the video's coda, “I began to notice subway riders absorbed in writing of their own.”

—Barry Schwabsky