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Art in America

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“First Look: Patricia Esquivias”
Hammer Museum, LA
By Alex Gartenfield



still from *Folklore I*, 2006, single-channel video, 143 minutes.

Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

STUTTERING BUT discursive, Patricia Esquivias's narrated short videos implicitly pose pointed questions: what do we know and how do we know it? More important, how do we experience knowing today? Her work, which often features close-up views of photographs, hand-drawn diagrams or a laptop's screen (blank or showing photos or file menus), are characterized by shy, deadpan humor, coy premeditation and stories whose intrigue is in their amusing, ambiguous connections. What do a 48-hour dance session called "destroy route" and a corrupt Spanish architect who eats 20 fried eggs have in common? Esquivias: "Perhaps the common base for the two events is 20th-century history in Spain." This is hyperlink wisdom, where research is displaced by fun facts.

This month, Esquivias makes her museum debut at the Hammer in Los Angeles. The 31-year-old artist is of Spanish descent but grew up in Venezuela; she said in a 2008 interview that her work is about getting to know her country of origin. In her ongoing "Folklore" series (begun in 2006), comprising 15- to 30-minute-long videos, this is a task not of immersion or translation but of grappling with sensibility and myth. In *Folklore I* (2006), the artist tells a story while the camera hovers over handwritten notes on graph paper that yield anthropological interest: tales of economic growth and corruption, elephants at soccer games and intelligent horses, the erotic connotations of paella. But we do not learn the names of the story's main characters. Esquivias's slow-paced tales seem intended as much to record the artist's invention and indecision as to impart knowledge or information. The videos showing computer screens are shot from an angle that replicates an everyday user's viewing position; this, along with the quotidian objects that appear on-screen, lends the works a homespun quality.

Esquivias's voice—she never appears physically—is childlike but self-aware, and she aspires to sound unrehearsed as she recites her material. Somewhere between pedagogy and comedy routine, *Folklore II* (2008) links two periods of perceived Spanish prosperity, the 16th-century reign of Philip II and that of the pop star Julio Iglesias in the 20th, by commonalities among the men's large estates, relationships to Filipinos, their eight children (respectively) and their one Oedipal son each. In typical form, when she gets to the "interesting" part, "the relationship of Spain to the son," she switches to the economic impact of the sun.

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The *Reads Like the Paper* videos (2006-ongoing) are shorter and more impressionistic pairings of speech and image, magnifying the fact that Esquivias's referents are unknown and her combinations absurd. In these snippets she shifts from being a playfully oblivious narrator to a seemingly unreliable one, as in #32, in which she exalts the sun while displaying a photograph of two fluorescent lights. Getting to know one's world becomes less about living in it and more about sifting through its amusing fragments. *Witness #27*, in which the artist discusses a photograph of a spotlight that used to shine on a historical monument. Without indulging in nostalgia for what is gone, Esquivias suggests that the means of seeing and of showing supplants what's to be seen.