

Murray Guy

453 West 17 Street New York NY 10011 T: +1 212 463 7372 F: +1 212 463 7319 info@murrayguy.com

ARTFORUM

18 October 2016



Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 41 minutes 15 seconds.

500 Words

by Moyra Davey as told to Laura Hoffman
Murray Guy

*A sequel to her acclaimed 2011 video *Les Goddesses*, Moyra Davey's new video *Hemlock Forest*, 2016, weaves together references to Mary Wollstonecraft, Chantal Akerman, and Karl Ove Knausgaard along with her own family stories. The forty-two-minute work will be featured in *La Biennale de Montréal* on October 18, 2016, and it will be on view there through January 15, 2017. The work will also be shown in Davey's solo exhibition at the *Bergen Kunsthall* in Norway, which runs from October 28, 2016 through January 8, 2017. Here, the New York-based artist discusses the origins of the piece.*

BERGEN KUNSTHALL asked me to make a new work on the occasion of a big show I'm doing there, in their very beautiful space, and then Montreal came on board as a coproducer. I decided to make a video, but without knowing what it would be about. The one I'd done before that, *Notes on Blue*, was also a commission, but in that case the Walker Art Center had handed me an assignment to make a piece in response to Derek Jarman's work. It's a gift to be asked to respond to something like that. In the case of Bergen it all had to come from me.

I had made *Les Goddesses*, which taps into the biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft and her progeny. She'd traveled to Scandinavia, so I reread the letters she wrote to her lover Gilbert Imlay on that trip. I'd also been reading Karl Ove Knausgaard and loved the idea of having him figure, albeit in an understated way, in the video, since it was going to show in Norway. I was struck by the image of the forest in both his and Wollstonecraft's writings, of the forest as a kind of restorative, nurturing, protective space. I also wanted something to represent the social, since Wollstonecraft was an activist, very concerned with social justice and rights for women. The idea of the subway came to me, and specifically a scene in the NYC subway that was part of Chantal Akerman's 1977 film *News from Home*, an incredible shot by Babette Mangolte that's always fascinated me. I started with

Murray Guy

453 West 17 Street New York NY 10011 T: +1 212 463 7372 F: +1 212 463 7319 info@murrayguy.com

those two paradigmatic images, the one of the forest, of nature, and the image of the subway car, a very urban, social kind of context.

So right from the beginning I had decided I was going to re-create the subway shot from Akerman's *News from Home*. As I mention in the video, I did that and the next day I read in the paper that Akerman committed suicide the day before. That sent me on this whole jag of delving into Akerman, who'd been a big influence on me when I was a graduate student in San Diego. Her death led me to watch and rewatch her early films and to find some incredible interviews online, which changed the direction of *Hemlock Forest* and made it as much about Akerman as anything else I'd been thinking about up to that point.

My son became part of the film: his leaving for college, and my ambivalence around writing or talking about that. The idea of the empty nest is such a cliché, but at the same time the feelings are very real. I was also thinking about my sister Jane losing her youngest daughter to an overdose, and those (hugely) different registers of loss. I was reconsidering *Les Goddesses*, and thinking that the picture I'd constructed of my family in it was too rosy, wondering if I should try and tell the story differently. I was preoccupied by the idea of truth and the highly subjective nature of my narrations. I liked the title *Hemlock Forest* because it suggested two things, the forest as a beautiful refuge, but also hemlock as a poison. In the film there's a lot about opiates and alcoholism, poisons that we humans gravitate toward.

I read a lot and from many different sources. Unfortunately I waste too much time on the New York Times, but when I come across something that interests me I note it down. I start with these notes, and then as I'm compiling a text, if I find connections I pull them together. For a video such as this, I write everything beforehand, mostly in fragments. Once I start filming, some things might be dropped because I realize they work on the page but not for the camera. Shooting a scene might give me an idea for another scene, in which case I go back to the writing and rework it. One of the things I do more and more in my videos is to reveal the process of making them, the process of thinking and writing. They're fairly transparent, in that they disclose how I came to tell the story.

In *Notes on Blue*, I talk about confession, quoting Borges especially. I've always had an urge to tell stories that are personal and intimate and I thought it would be a solution to link these personal anecdotes to narratives from literature and history, like the Wollstonecraft-Shelley biographies. I thought if I could make these connections across time—not just speak of my inner world and personal memories, but link them to other histories, especially literary ones—it would give the “confessional” a visibility that can be hard to secure with this type of material. Surprisingly, or likely not, viewers often tell me they crave the autobiographical over the historical. I like to invoke Fassbinder in this regard, who said, and I paraphrase: The more honestly you put yourself into the story, the greater will be its reach.