

On Photography Elisabeth Subrin's *The Fancy* and other works

Thursday, January 26 at 7 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

In association with SFMOMA's exhibition *Francesca Woodman*, San Francisco Cinematheque is proud to present *The Fancy*, Elisabeth Subrin's oblique portrait of the late photographer. Writes Subrin: "*The Fancy* is a speculative, experimental work that explores the short life of Francesca Woodman, culled only from the public record of published catalogues of and about her photographs. Structural in form, the video radically reorganizes information from the catalogues in order to pose questions about biographical form, history and fantasy, female subjectivity, evidence and issues of authorship and intellectual property." With the film—which never depicts Woodman or her work—based largely on explorations of sites in which the artist lived and worked and on haunting reenactments and verbal descriptions of her photographs, the film's ostensible subject is kept at tantalizing distance, emerging as a mysterious, ultimately unknowable presence haunting the present. Subrin's provocative portrait will be screened with additional works exploring topics of photographic representation, gendered portraiture, gender performance and the aesthetics of institutional exhibition: *the vision machine* by Peggy Ahwesh, *miniatures* by Stephanie Barber, *(If I Can Sing a Sing About) Ligatures* by Abigail Child, *Photography is Easy* by Leslie Thornton and four works by Hester Scheurwater: *Lisa*, *Heal Me*, *I Must Be Beautiful Too* and *I Wanted You*. (Steve Polta)

Photography Is Easy (Version 2) (2010) by Leslie Thornton; digital video, color, sound, 6 minutes, file from the maker

"In the ongoing project *Photography is Easy*, Thornton continues her investigation of the production of meaning through media such as photography, film and video. Thornton and a companion are seen hiking through a desert, photographing and recording the journey. Shots of desert landscapes are overlaid with the artist's running commentary and text about Thornton's experience of making a photograph. Questioning the value of the rarified image, Thornton investigates the porous boundaries between the still and the moving image." (Electronic Arts Intermix)

miniatures (2011) by Stephanie Barber; digital video, color, sound, 2 minutes, file from the maker

Between June 25 and August 7, 2011 Stephanie Barber moved her studio into the Baltimore Museum of Art where she created a new video each day in a central gallery open to museum visitors. The goal of this project, entitled *Jhana and the Rats of James Olds* or *31 days/31 videos*, was to create a series of short, poetic videos in the playful and serious footprints of Oulipo games and daily meditations; creating one new video each day. The exhibit was both a constantly changing installation as well as a collaborative performance in which museum visitors were present as spectator and often creative partner. This video was created on the eighth day of this exhibit.

On *miniatures*: "A series of sentences read by museum visitors inspired by, and paired with, a number of miniature Elizabethan portraits. Words and paintings—each seem equally able and unable to represent a life. The man who reads the line 'I think constantly about my coming demise' came through the exhibition several times and participated in a few different pieces. He is big, young, strong and confident. I had him read the line many times before he got it just right. I think it was hard for him to imagine a worry of this sort." (Stephanie Barber)

www.stephaniebarber.com

the vision machine (1997) by Peggy Ahwesh; 16mm, color, sound, 20 minutes, print from Canyon Cinema

“The girls-only party scenes in *the vision machine* have both the ruddy look of overexposed home movies and the richly burnished texture of Renaissance paintings cracking under their veneer. A riff on Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (Ahwesh, with Keith Sanborn’s collaboration, inscribes the lyrics of ‘Wild Thing’ on a warped video version of a roto-relief) and on Buñuel’s *Viridiana* (here the lowlifes invading the manor are women artists), *the vision machine* is an inspired depiction of girls dressing up and acting out, pleased as punch to have taken over the screen.” (Amy Taubin, *The Village Voice*)

Heal Me (2000) by Hester Scheurwater; video, color, sound, 3 minutes, tape from Video Data Bank

I Must Be Beautiful Too (2000) by Hester Scheurwater; video, color, sound, 3 minutes, tape from Video Data Bank

Lisa (2001) by Hester Scheurwater; video, color, sound, 3 minutes, tape from Video Data Bank

I Wanted You (2001) by Hester Scheurwater; video, color, sound, 3 minutes, tape from Video Data Bank

“Since 1996, Scheurwater has made video installations and experimental films that have been shown all over the world at festivals, museums, galleries and art spaces. In many of her short films and videos, Hester Scheurwater’s camera explores the relationships between human beings, and between humans and space, relationships that rarely flourish. The modern individual appears isolated from reality, unable to connect with self or surroundings. In Scheurwater’s universe there is very little room for human warmth; the only hope that remains is the camera itself, feverishly searching for compassion in the remnants of decay.” (Video Data Bank)

(If I Can Sing a Song About) Ligatures (2009) by Abigail Child; digital video, b&w, sound, 5 minutes, DVD from the maker

“Third in my series of *Foreign Films* exploring relations of text and image, how text turns the image. In *(If I Can Sing A Song About) Ligatures*, words taken from lines of Nada Gordon’s unrequited love poems, whose sentences are taken, in their turn, from anonymous web poems, reveal a history of sexuality. *Ligatures* pronounces the poignancy of desire; its power and its vulnerability. The women are visions, girls, desirous, delicate, illusory. The illusionary nature is made manifest—transversing boundaries, expectations and physical limits—by the close. We in the audience, creating our own identities in the moments, remain trans-fixed.” (Abigail Child)

The Fancy (2000) by Elisabeth Subrin; video, color, sound, 36 minutes, tape from the maker

“*The Fancy* is a speculative, experimental work that explores the short life of Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), culled only from the public record of published catalogues of and about her photographs. Structural in form, the video radically reorganizes information from the catalogues in order to pose questions about biographical form, history and fantasy, female subjectivity, evidence, and issues of authorship and intellectual property.” (Elisabeth Subrin)

“At no point in *The Fancy*, a somber, eerie, and deceptively simple representation of Woodman’s life, work, and death, are we ever shown a single example of the artist’s actual work. Instead, we’re presented with an assortment of objects that may or may not have been either her personal possessions or the props she used in her photographic tableaux, and a series of empty rooms in which she may or may not have lived or worked. But Subrin’s video is more concerned with absences than it is with the facts enunciated by its skeptical narrator. Though the few catalogues published on Woodman’s art are exhaustively referenced, Subrin’s tape hints at conspiracy, calling attention to the Woodman family’s unwillingness to make the bulk of her body of photography available, as if they were intent on collapsing the artist’s chosen channel of communication.

“Subrin’s videos are acute, highly imaginative excursions in precise yet speculative detective work. Drawn to marginal figures, she subjects them to rigorous biographical needling, devising a whole new approach to documentary in the process. In fact, the filmmaker’s work to date, *Swallow* (95), *Shulie* (97), and *The Fancy*, are unclassifiable; you could call them formalist experiments in documentary wrappers. Through them, Subrin cunningly insists that all along the wrong people have been asking the wrong questions. Forget what you’ve read. This is history the way it should have been written.” (Nicole Armour, *Film Comment*. Read more at sfcinematheque.wordpress.com)