

Dirty Looks

# Under the Stars

Experimental Portrait Films of Stars  
and their Makers



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Wednesday, July 27th, 2011

## PROGRAM

*Home Stories*, MATTHIAS MÜLLER, 1990

*Quarry*, GLEN FOGEL, 2008

*A Hallow Kiss for Mark LaPore*, LUTHER PRICE, 2008

*A Separate Peace*, PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA, 2009

*Her Fragrant Emulsion*, LEWIS KLAHR, 1987

*Rose Hobart*, JOSEPH CORNELL, 1936

*The Maids*, PAUL MPAGI SEPUYA, 2011

*Andy Warhol*, MARIE MENKEN, 1964 - 65

Silvershed

## Introduction



*75 years ago, Joseph Cornell invented the fan edit. From a trivial adventure film, Cornell did away with narrative pretense, spinning that Hollywood yarn into an intricate and obsessive study, a loving portrait of the film's female star, Rose Hobart. Sometimes stars endure, long after their movies have become démodé. As such, there's an honesty of vision to Cornell's film, which trims the large production to its luminous lead.*

For some time, experimental artists have turned to stars for their alchemical effect. Assembling found footage or in rare moment of direct access, these filmmakers employ star imagery for a succinct visual power, a kind of glyphic language akin to contemporary mythology. Whether it's Kenneth Anger's gossipy tales of old Hollywood in his *Hollywood Babylon* books or Warhol's reinvention of the canon for the Factory, stars form a visual framework which commands power over us all. Floating in their fantastical realm, between fact and fiction, stars truly are heavenly bodies. When they appear, pasted into more handmade productions, their meaning is subtly undone and their image becomes shockingly personal. We begin to see how one reads them.

*Rose Hobart*, for instance, projects a personal psychology, since each seemingly random edit was, in fact, deliberate and selected. Ultimately, the film becomes as much a portrait of Cornell, of this personal obsession, as it is a dreamy vision of its starlet. Lewis Klahr's *Her Fragrant Emulsion* (1987) is more invasive a confrontation. Lifting footage from B-actress Mimsy Farmer's performance in *Road to Salina*, Klahr works at the very surface of the source footage, to reach out and caress dear Mimsy. The result is erotic, uncanny and somewhat disturbing.

As is Glen Fogel's video *Quarry* (2008). In the work, Fogel inserts himself into an episode of *Law and Order: SVU* portraying a pedophile with tremendous olfactory skills. The footage spastically cuts between the original cast member and Fogel's reenactment, as they take a trip down memory lane, sniffing the baseball caps their young victims. Fogel and his doppelgänger drone the names of each boy and Mariska Hargitay looks on in contempt, clearly not amused. A more devotional title is Matthias Müller's *Home Stories* (with Dirk Schaefer, 1990). Here, Müller links together gestures and conventions of the 1950s woman's film, rephotographing footage directly from the T.V. screen. Through the films (which include *The Birds*, *Imitation of Life*, *Written on the Wind*, *Portrait in Black*, *Madame X*, *All that Heaven Allows* amongst many others), these starlets, well... mostly Lana Turner, obsessively repeat melodramatic gestures. They hurl themselves upon the bed, fly up the stairs in suspense, pensively switch on a lamp or run to the door in terror. Müller's film is perhaps the most critical in its investigation of behavioral stereotyping. Still, there's definite homage being paid to these potentially problematic films, for who could make such an intricate picture without ultimately being in love with the source material?

With their signature styles, Marie Menken and Luther Price train their cameras on the filmmakers, themselves. In *Andy Warhol* (1963-64) Menken, granted an insider's access to Warhol's Factory, films a far more industrious artist than the dandy Andy is often mistaken as. And Price creates a very elliptical portrait of the recently deceased experimental filmmaker with his *A Hallow Kiss for Mark LaPore* (2008).

Rounding out the program, Paul Mpagi Sepuya will premier a new work, *The Maids*. Like the other films collected here, Sepuya manages star persona as a persuasive and ideological tactic. Glenda Jackson and Susannah York shine through, in the footage Sepuya mines from the 1975 film adaptation of Jean Genet's murderous maids. Our recognition of them grants far greater entry to this experimental cinema than we might otherwise afford. It's exciting, unnerving and strangely liberating, stargazing out of the Hollywood formulae; to watch the public icons perform private dramas is a rare sight to behold, a release from the mainstream ideologies that guide dominant film culture.

## Home Stories, 1990



*Emulating the very melodramas it deconstructs, Home Stories manipulates its audience, carrying us through a range of familiar feelings and compelling our allegiance to the film's stars.*

*A swooning score suggests the romance of interiors: the staircase is elaborate, the hallway vast. That vase is not quite overburdened.*

The bedroom is a place where rumination can happen for mid-century women. All sorts of leaks are possible. It's a refuge from self-government, so all the known postures of disappointment can be indulged. Sororal betrayal and frustration in love tend to reduce one to a lump in bed. Why not luxuriate in it?

Unfortunately such repose cannot maintain. Suddenly all those white women impeccably dressed respond to strange sounds. There is an impulse to dismiss such easy, decontextualized startling as bourgeois fears of home invasion, but again the film slyly manipulates. As our stars turn lights on and off, we understand the tedium of the gesture; the women begin to seem trapped. Seemingly boxed in, they nudge us in a sympathetic direction. We ask, When a house is so big, does the mind naturally consider someone hiding in it? Is this one of the ironies of comfort—that it seeks out ways to negate itself?

Looking out the window can be a form of social preparation many people recognize, yet strangled horns turn this into a sad moment when all the women seem to resolve to stay inside.

These performers excelled at producing stock emotions—disappointment, agitation, fear, anxiety, shock—and it helped make them famous. Through repetition, the film suggests there is something monstrous in this large-scale manufacturing of feelings. Yet it is also impressive, desirable, funny. Danger insists on a wardrobe—silk robes, sequins and a thin cigarette.

There is a difference between fear and anxiety, isn't there? Fear corresponds to something real; it is a correct feeling. There is someone in the house. Anxiety refers to something possible. There could be someone in the house. Home Stories dissolves this distinction; stripped of context, the women are forced into a single narrative. They run, whether or not someone is after them.

What of that running, then? If each woman is afraid, then each woman's running can be said to be correct, in proportion to danger, the actions of an agent. She wants to live and her movement is the splendid sign! But if each woman is anxious, then such running is wrong, pathological, the symptoms of a dumb animal.

The film's greatest success (and its greatest cruelty) is the way it hovers, deliciously, between these two possibilities. We can't be sure whether the women are running for their lives or from them. All that seems to have mattered for their casting was that they be able to do so gracefully, in heels.

CHANTAL JOHNSON, Birdsong Micropress

## Quarry, 2008



*Quarry is composed of a scene taken from the television show, "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit". The scene is inter-cut shot for shot with Fogel's own re-enactment. In the original episode, also titled "Quarry", a convicted pedophile is asked to identify numerous baseball caps, presumably each belonging to a boy that he molested. He does this by holding them to his face to smell them in an erotically charged fashion while the investigator awkwardly observes. In the reenactment Fogel complicates the relationship from within by assuming the role of the pedophile. The artist challenges the implicit equation of sexual abuse and homosexuality perpetuated in popular culture. The ideology of "Quarry" is disrupted by embodying its address. Fogel infiltrates the structure and discourse of the scene, upending its assumptions and destabilizing its authority.*

## A Hallow Kiss for Mark LaPore, 2008

*mark is beautiful.....gifted  
and wonderful....most  
handsome and  
gracefull.....so giving and  
quiet....always gave me a  
hug when he said  
hellow.....  
i love you so much.....  
thanx mark, ....  
luther....*

## A Separate Peace, 2009 The Maids, 2011



### Wounds

#### On John Knowles' A Separate Peace and Jean Genet's The Maids

While much of my studio work is about precision: the exacting yet intimate portraiture of those in my intimate and familiar circles, a compliment and opposite to this practice is my fascination with the idea of failure and wounding. Exploring the space where image-making and storytelling fail as an artist, in the ability to tell or recount one's story, and how the relationships laid down in one medium are translated to another. It is through these ideas, first fully developed in my text/abstraction project ALEXANDRIA (2007), that I came to work with the film adaptations of John Knowles' A SEPARATE PEACE (1972, dir. Larry Peerce) and Jean Genet's THE MAIDS (1974, dir. Christopher Miles). These films both function for me as recurring wounds, or in other words, acts of failure that beg a constant, nagging, return by the viewer.

In the case of the video works that I have created from them, I was interested in how a text becomes translated and fixed as an image, and how that image can then be abstracted and collapsed in on itself. The material used in these videos are photographs, several seconds in exposure, of moments in the films. I selected them for movement and editing, where the camera pans, circles or follows the characters, and the editing cuts between one character and the other in the midst of extended glances and conversations. The final pieces are intended to be presented as looped video installations, and are presented in Dirty Looks as short videos.

Reading A SEPARATE PEACE in middle school, I found the friendship between Gene and Finny in the book deeply troubling to me in a way that I could not quite explain at the time. It was directly connected to my not yet fully articulated realization that my attraction was to other boys. Their relationship is fraught with admiration, competition, and (un)conscious attempts to contain the other. In a central scene, Gene causes a catastrophic accident crippling the once athletic Finny. He becomes overwhelmed by anxiety at the impulse for his action.

An excerpt from the book, when Gene is alone in their shared room trying on his friends clothes, after having caused the injury which sends Finny away from school:

But when I looked in the mirror it was no remote aristocrat I had become, no character out of daydreams. I was Phineas, Phineas to the life. I even had his humorous expression on my face, his sharp, optimistic awareness. I had no idea why this gave me such intense relief, but it seemed, standing there in Finny's triumphant shirt, that I would never stumble through the confusions of my own character again.

...That night I slept easily, and it was only on waking up that this illusion was gone, and I was confronted with myself, and what I had done to Finny.

The story itself is framed around a wound, the memory of Gene about his relationship to that place and time where the accident occurred, made heavier by Finny's eventual death at the end of the book. He is returning, like a ritual, to that site years later to re-tell and resolve the narrative for himself.

These acts: ritual, wounding, and pilfering are also linked to homosexual desire in the work of Jean Genet. From Edmund White's GENET: A BIOGRAPHY:

Interestingly Genet himself linked his pilfering and thievery to the first emergence of his homosexual desires. Heterosexual roles are reciprocal, not reversible, but homosexual roles are often redundant and a form of admiration or envy. For a classic homosexual sissy (and Genet was clearly one, although the term is less frequently applied in French than in English), the relationship to a sturdy scrappy maleness is never a simple matter... the first act of homosexual love, then, is impersonation, but since he knew of the taboo Genet links the guilt of theft to the guilt of homosexuality, which is another way of stealing, another for of forbidden appropriation.

Actions become rituals, which are wounds, as they are "fragments that act as framing devices that go both ways, into the past and into the future," as my friend Alex recently described. It is through the action that something is made concrete, in this case an abstract fear or anxiety. Ritual acts of imitation, copying and borrowing are some of the first queer acts that, for me, preceded that full realization and articulation of my homosexual orientation.

The ambiguous sexual tension that can be read into Gene and Finny's friendship in A SEPARATE PEACE finds its fullest terror in Genet's play THE MAIDS, in which the sisters Claire and Solange (originally intended to be performed by two male actors) repeatedly perform the ritual killing of their oblivious mistress. They spiral around each other gripped by desire, humiliation, terror and ecstasy until the death of Claire in the place of their mistress. Where and with whom, in this case, the wound remains is left unclear. The roles have collapsed in on themselves, and the obliteration of the other becomes a stand-in for the destruction of the self, that ritual action that brings the awareness necessary to move forward.

## Her Fragrant Emulsion, 1987



### LEWIS KLAHR in discussion with BRADFORD NORDEEN, 19 July, 2011

Since your film is a kind of portrait film of B-actress Mimsy Farmer, can you talk a little about how you first discovered Farmer and what about her compelled you to make this film.

*i saw her in "More" when i was in my junior year of college-- fall or spring of 77-78 at a SUNY Buffalo screening. i was immediately smitten-- but she was also immediately familiar. over time i would realize that i had seen her a number of times before in films where she was a supporting actress like Hot Rods to Hell. there is a kind of odd naturalism in her performance style that is both off from normal conventions and emotionally exaggerated. it is spontaneous and wild and vulnerable and dangerous which is appropriate for the characters she portrays. she gives the impression that she is showing you who she really is on some level. of course her androgyny was very sexually stimulating to me-- something Argento used very effectively in Four Flies on Grey Velvet. she is a young woman who is also very much like a young boy. There is an interview i read with Mimsy where she talks about her performance style and when she figured out her approach and how this was a conscious decision she made to go in this direction and leave normal, expected conventions of film acting behind.*

**This film style differs, almost radically, from the kind of "animation" that currently characterizes your career.**

*i prefer to call it single frame filmmaking. not all single frame films are animations. this was before i worked with cutouts as my main form. at that point i was predominantly working with found footage. in fact Her Fragrant Emulsion is a distinct borderline in my work, it was the last found footage film i felt i needed to create before switching to cutouts as my main form.*

**Why did you choose to work with existing film footage in lieu of manipulating still images of Farmer?**

*that wasn't a choice-- it never occurred to me to work with her as a cutout. also being a piece expressing sexual desire, i wanted/needed her to be as life like as possible. i had worked with Mimsy once before rephotographing her performance in Riot On Sunset Strip and her LSD dance for inclusion in my early film The History of Fingersnapping which was about a succession of youth movements from the early 60's to the punk of the late 70's.*

**In working obsessively with her image, do you feel that this intimacy "revealed" Farmer in any way?**

*good question. i don't think it revealed anything to me that i hadn't already observed, experienced, felt in watching her movies. it did make the intimacy of my experience with her image available to others, to viewers of my completed film. i remember filmmaker Jeanne Liotta remarking after one screening that she felt she had gotten to know Mimsy through the course of and duration of my film. that pleased me.*

**Did it bring about a closeness with the starlet or did it only succeed in making her more abstract?**

*it basically squelched my desire. it ended my pursuit of her image. drained her image of it's power of attraction at least for the short term.*

**Guy Maddin has described the film as "a piñata of sad nostalgias," though it also strikes me as intrusive or uncomfortable, also.**

*something maddin also includes and gets at quite explicitly by stating that i was "stalking her cinematically". there is nothing nostalgic in my response to Mimsy or in the finished film for me personally. that's more Maddin's nostalgia emerging while he is viewing it. Mimsy happens to be from a certain time period but i made this film in 1986 & 87 and the early 1970's when the footage of Mimsy is from, didn't feel very far away then and were not a period i was nostalgic for. i actually prefer the late Tom Chomont's understanding of my relationship to this image of desire. he wrote about the "impossibility" of it-- something i knew from the beginning, i didn't make this film expecting that it would allow me to meet Mimsy Farmer in person for instance. i can't remember exactly what Chomont wrote but it described something about the unbridgeable distance, the unattainability of the love i had for Mimsy's image as being a kind of sacred love. but i might be remembering this wrong.*

**Were all of these aspects of Farmer's image and career (and your relationship to it) conscious responses that you wanted the film to arouse?**

*I would say my film doesn't deal with her career-- it uses footage from only one of her performances, The Road to Salina. i wasn't thinking so much in terms of the finished film until it was finished or at least i was editing it. i was exploring, open to where the experience of actually making the film and immersing myself in Mimsy's image would take me. what i was questing after was a way to make love to Mimsy's image through this formal technique of strip filmmaking which was rough, raw, textural and tactile-- a kind of touching with the eyes and ears. ultimately satisfying for me only as filmmaking not in terms of fulfilling my sexual desire. working with Mimsy's image and the immersion it required was the complete opposite of the sexual arousal that had motivated me to work with it in the first place.*

## Rose Hobart, 1936



*There is magic here. Last night the moon fell into the sea. All was silent. The fall was silent. The moon was silent. The sea was silent. The sea is now a grave. The wind passes thought the palms of trees, waves of waves and everything is rippling. A magic man greeted her.*

*She knows this. She knows of the magic because she came here for it. Out the french windows into the night and a glance at the sky makes her smile. She came here for a man and now she stays because of the magic. Cups are handed to her and she drinks.*

The other night a volcano exploded into the air and killed a man. He fell to his knees and disappeared - faded to black. It is always night here. It crawls on her, zooms into her dreams and she wakes with the thought that she is not awake yet. Mosquito nets are eyelids and she parts them and she feels like she will be parting them forever.

A ghost ready for a dinner party. A body like a white snake and breasts too small for anyone to confuse for motherhood. Something other than earthy. The perfect conduit for what passes through her. He smiles and leads her by the arm. The magic man will convey her from image to image, moment to moment. And he is a friend and she will come not to trust him. The devil and a gentleman. Magic can turn you into a stranger to yourself.

Everything is mud, a mixture. In the light of the moon it shines back broken pieces. God shook and she trembled. They pushed the crocodiles back into the river last night. They had descended like a nightmare but now the danger is gone. Danger is slow here. Happiness is slow here too. But then again everything here exists between emotions. Afterthoughts and glimpses and walks are the signpost and the content. Two nights ago she leaned over the balcony and watched something.

A system is at work here. And she does not need to know its rules to understand its existence. She just needs to feel it. A candle sinks in a glass, hands slap chests, a tiger stalks. An image in front of the other, on top of the other. She's been dreaming again.

A gun and a monkey, talismans to protect. Bad men are everywhere. They stand in brown beauty staring at her with menace. They stand before her in tuxedos drinking, talking at her like a child. This little girl has done a bad thing. She has chosen to live in a dream. They chose violence. She chooses a gun and a monkey. A gun to cut the air if the dream turns sour. A monkey to hold like love in her arms. She tames the dream. For a moment. The monkey lies down to sleep as she watches on with a smile as if she were now the protector of its dreams. A god.

The wind again. It is time to leave. These men with torches light her way. They make her feel like the woman she is. Like the woman she will become. It is always night here. Time like two currents drifting into one another. She is arriving.

To live like this, she will live like this forever—bookended in cycles.

DIEGO MEDINA, Birdsong Micropress

Rose Hobart © The Museum of Modern Art

## Andy Warhol, 1963–64



*Though art star Andy Warhol is the ostensible subject of Marie Menken's 1965 film that takes the artist's name, her oeuvre in general displays an equal concern with the illuminating quality of the celestial – not in a grandiose manner emphasizing the distance between heaven and earth, but through a flatness and superficiality that underscores the ubiquity of twinkling stars. On the one hand, this is revelatory of Menken's personal relationship with Warhol, both as a friend and as a collaborator. But, on the other, the intimacy that Menken shares with Warhol is less direct than it is mediated by a mutual approach to the Bolex camera.*

Straddling the art historical transition from Abstract Expressionism to Pop, arguably evidenced in her own transition of medium from painting to film, Menken's interest in luminosity could be couched in the rhetoric of modernism — a celebration of the limitations inherent to film. Likewise, her obsessive use of the camera to chronicle a given subject — flowers, the moon, a piece of architecture — could be described as diaristic. But light in Menken's films operates less in the sense of poetic revelation, of shedding light onto, and more in the way of simulacral revelry. Reflecting Warhol's dictum, 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am,' the camera for both artists is prosthetic; i.e. not an essential(ized) channel for expression, but an artificial instrument with which to manufacture vision. Seen in this light, it is significant that Menken's portrait of Warhol was made shortly after his relocation to the Silver Factory, with its Billy Name foil-and-mirrors interior design. Here, too, we might recall another of Menken's films, *Arabesque* for Kenneth Anger (1958-1961), that plays on the meaning of arabesque. On the one hand, Menken traces the intertwined lines of the palatial Alhambra. On the other, her handheld dance with the camera is its own arabesque, a choreography of capture that is further carried out in the cut of the editing room.

A filmmaker who has only recently begun to receive the critical attention bestowed upon her (gay) male counterparts, Menken's dexterity with her camera prosthesis aligns her work with that of Maya Deren, which evidences 'the "depersonalization of the individual" and the re-creation, through framing and editing, of an unconscious grammar of motion' (Suárez 71). Motion, too, might be one of the salient differences between Menken and Warhol's filmic output. Both artists hypnagogically explore and examine the so-called everyday, employing processes of seriality — the silkscreen, stop action — but where Menken moves and envelopes, Warhol is still, as in works like *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964). Accelerated or extended, what both approaches share, however, is a horizontal emphasis that moves away from the monumental and toward the entropic (dis)order of things. Like the sequins she would incorporate into her paintings, the stars of Marie Menken's films are myriad, impersonal, glittering.

DANIEL SANDER, Birdsong Micropress

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