

issue 9 july • september 2005 \$7.00

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MARCEL, METAPHOR, & METAMORPHOSIS: THE STUDIO VISIT IN À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU by David Carrier



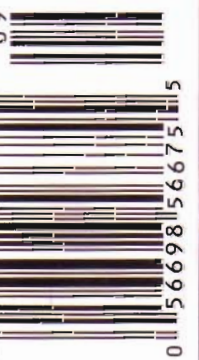
MARLENE MCCARTY
by Rachel Kushner

OPEN THE GATES
by Domenick Ammirati

ART BANDS IN L.A.
by Alex Segade

THE FACE AT WAR
by Paul Foss

SUE DE BEER
by Laurence A. Rickels



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Maria Friberg BY SUSAN ROSS

Conner Contemporary Art, Washington DC April 1 - 30, 2005

Maria Friberg's new series on display at Conner Contemporary Art, "still lives," has a weary sensuality, an almost Old European romanticism that marks a radical departure from the slick, advertising-like images the Swedish artist has shown in the past. Although comprising four separate photographs and a four-minute video loop titled *endless limit* (all work 2004), two images dominate this show. In the first, *still lives 1 (woman + man)*, two young blonde Nordic deities—figures Friberg likens to white lilies at the peak of bloom—emerge from the mist to peer down at us with a haughty sexuality. With their taut bodies and tawny skin, the two figures vibrate with a sexual energy that contradicts the passivity of their poses. The second, a monumental work titled *still lives 3 (man in bookshelf)*, features a prone male figure who has somehow inserted himself between rows of leather bound volumes of Swedish etymology. Here again, two opposing forces countermand each other. The enormous will it took for this man to crawl his way between the ancient tomes seems to have turned on him. By his own volition, the figure has become trapped in the unyielding strata of cultural history, the pathos of his condition clearly marked by the vulnerability of the soft flesh on the naked soles of his feet.

In recent years, Friberg has earned attention for photographs and videos that intelligently dissect social conventions. Her leitmotif is the businessman or, more appropriately, his suit, which operates in Friberg's work as a tool for analyzing the performance of masculine power. With "still lives," the artist cunningly expands her examination of the inescapable tension between submission and will. In the past, her male subjects have essentially been synecdoches. By revealing their insecurities, Friberg has questioned not only male power but, by extension, its relationship to femininity. In this new series, it is now the feminine that is announced by metonymy and absence. The hide of the books in *still lives 3*, the pelt in *still lives 2 (woman + dog)*, and the inert pose in *still lives 4 (man by lake)* are intended as female elements that now partake in the force of masculinity that accompanied her earlier work: the long-distance dynamic of murder and preservation. Masculinity and femininity would appear to define each other in each other's absence, at once as funereal still life and, perhaps, as affirmational "still alive."

Friberg's "still lives" has a disciplined beauty that is strongly underscored by the show's skillful installation in Conner Contemporary's clean white space. Yet the photographs are also inflected with a Weimar-like ennui that raises the issue of our relationship to cultural traditions. The high art references in these images—from the very title of the exhibition to the allusion to Narcissus in *still lives 4*—cleverly expand on Friberg's analysis of gender dynamics, asking us to consider further the nature of the forces that define us. This statement is most clearly pronounced in *endless limit*, which plays in a continual loop in the gallery's video space. Here, the disembodied feet of a flamenco dancer trapped in an endless performance announce the frustration of self-expression bound by the predetermined steps of our mutual exclusion.



(TOP TO BOTTOM) MARIA FRIBERG, *STILL LIVES 3 (MAN IN BOOKSHELF)*, 2004, CHROMO, 66.9 x 97.6 IN.; *STILL LIVES 4 (MAN BY LAKE)*, 2004, CHROMO, 47.2 x 58.6 IN.; © MARIA FRIBERG. COURTESY CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART, WASHINGTON DC. SA - MONTSE, *THE ICH-MANIFESTATION*, 1980, STILL. COURTESY THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.