

Moyra Davey

Portrait / Landscape

30 August
– 21 October 2017

Opening, Wednesday, 30 August, 7-9pm

Far From Hot Baths

“Life is a movie. Death is a photograph.”
– Susan Sontag, Introduction to Peter Hujar, *Portraits in Life and Death*
(filmed by Moyra Davey in *Hujar/Palermo*, 2010)

Even when Moyra Davey’s films begin from a specific situation or event in her personal or familial life, as both *Hemlock Forest* and *Wedding Loop* do, I get the greatest pleasure from them when I think of myself, not as a passive viewer, but as a “fellow-labourer”, as the English Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, described his ideal reader. I sit down with notebook and pen, and make a list of the quotations, references and allusions that make up the layered texture of Davey’s films – the trail of books, essays, articles and films that opens up from her work. I read and watch as many of these as I can, and then return to Davey’s films again and again. This sounds like – and is indeed – hard work. But it never feels like a pedantic or purely intellectual exercise. It keeps bringing me back to the core of what must remain difficult, unspoken or unspeakable in the films. It also introduces me to, or makes me re-experience, these other writers, artists and filmmakers – Mary Wollstonecraft, Chantal Akerman, Julia Margaret Cameron, Hervé Guibert, Virginia Woolf, Simone Weil, Natalia Ginzburg and Louise Bourgeois, to name a few – as integral to my gradually complicated understanding of Davey’s films. What deepens and widens in the process is not, or not just, the sum of my learning, but something more inscrutable: a restive intensity of living, thinking and working that leads to a sharpening of my own perception of life and art.

It is an intensity that allows nothing to remain static. Davey paces about continually in her apartment in the films, reading out from her own notes; trains hurtle through the subway or pass each other; the light keeps shifting as it comes in through the windows and illuminates everyday objects; the books, marked or cut into sections, come alive as their pages are turned or dust is blown off their tops; the camera moves across the surface of photographs, which are brought into oblique or ironic relations with the artist’s commentary. Even the bed turns into a place of ceaseless activity. It is as if reading – like looking, thinking and writing – is the antidote to a state of rest, a means of courting chance even when the film-maker as reader, writer and photographer has to consciously overcome her fear of what she calls the Real, of everything that lies outside the controlled atmosphere of her studio. This relentless reading and note-keeping is Davey’s way of “plugging away at things”. It sustains a doggedness that produces a peculiarly dispassionate tonality of vision and voice in her films, a steady purposiveness that is never allowed to sit still but becomes a kind of serenity, reminding me of Emily Dickinson’s “internal difference,/ Where the meanings, are”.

I have written elsewhere how the source of this restless movement in *Hemlock Forest* (and in its predecessor, *Les Goddesses*) lies in the convergence of two unresolved anxieties: the fear of low-hanging fruit and the fear of the opposite of low-hanging fruit; between risking what is too easy and risking what is too difficult; between obtaining something too effortlessly and losing something through too much effort; between the promise of immediate access and the denial of such access. Davey’s metaphor of low-hanging fruit leads naturally, for me, to the oppressive sensibleness and comfort of William Godwin’s advice to Mary Wollstonecraft, the 19th-century British writer, whose life and writings are interlaced with Davey’s own in *Hemlock Forest*. “A disappointed woman,” writes Godwin to Mary, “should try to construct happiness ‘out of a set of materials within [her] reach.’” In the films, what keeps these two anxieties distinct are reading, writing, thinking and connecting, and I would risk adding, having been mothered and of being a mother. The last two – the subject of Davey’s anthology, *Mother Reader* – become, for me, the “raw and intractable” subject of *Hemlock Forest*, eluding as well as confronting her in the film as the void of apparent subjectlessness.

Wedding Loop, in the way it spins out its own stories around the portraits in *Portrait/Landscape*, continues to explore the risks involved in working with a set of materials within one’s reach, pitching the photographer as well as her subjects deeper into

a vortex of potentially unmanageable anxieties and emotions. Davey thus stands Godwin's advice to Mary on its head, turning the very solution offered by him into the difficulties that her art must negotiate. Low-hanging fruit could turn out to be more difficult to hold and keep than the ones that hang higher. If the subject of *Hemlock Forest* is the problem of a mother seeking permission to hold her son in the embrace of her work, then *Wedding Loop* is about the fear and guilt produced in the photographer in turning to a close (and closed) circle of fragile women – her mother, siblings and their children, living as well as lost – to construct an “autofiction” of public celebration, if not of private happiness.

Faced with the “tears, angst, anger and drunkenness” of her “goddesses” and their progeny during her sister's daughter's wedding, the photographer finds herself returning to her role of the 1980s, of “the one who watches and waits” with her camera and “corrals people into the light”. Yet, the intervening decades have made her more incurably addicted to her art. It has become an imperative for her “to make, make, make”, as Delphine Seyrig told Chantal Akerman, when Akerman was in despair that filmmaking had ceased to generate euphoria in her. The maker of *Wedding Loop* finds herself driven by anxieties that happen to be more about failing her art than about failing her family. She guards this fear of failure as a refuge, or an escape, from the familial bleakness that threatens to engulf her during the wedding, distancing herself from it through her impatience to get back home and take her film to the lab.

Could it be, then, that the photographer's relationship with her subjects, with her “derelict family”, is founded on a necessary act of dereliction? Does this dereliction become the photographer's unsaintly version of the relationship between “creation” and “decreation” that Simone Weil had formulated in one of her notebooks: “We participate in the creation of the world by decreasing ourselves”? Could photography, especially the making of portraits, have become the very opposite of participation, turning Weil's “program of getting the self out of the way” (in the words of the Canadian writer, Anne Carson) into an essentially self-preserving mode of art-making that uses the desperate first person of writing to voice the photographer's misgivings about her work?

Yet, the world that Davey creates with these portraits, in *Portrait/Landscape*, is assembled out of gestures of direct address and connection, an epistolary delivery system that exposes her portraits of the damaged to the risk of another kind of damage. Traces of postage – folds, labels, tapes and stamps – become part of the material and meaning of the work, diverting the images away from the preciousness of the art object and returning them to what Davey calls “postcard status”, pinned to the wall without the protection of frames and glass. Davey cannot be unaware of the ambiguity of the name, “Hemlock Forest”, combining natural beauty with natural toxicity (hemlock was used to poison Socrates), just as the negatives and positives of photography become interchangeable in the work, mixing the real and the spectral. Bodily presence is interspersed with a consciously infantilizing calligraphy as people vanish into their carefully-written-out names, which are then photographed as negatives. A name like “Euripedes, Jr” begins to resonate with a semi-humorous allusion to classical tragedy. Some of the people in *Portrait/Landscape* reappear in traditionally posed portraits as well, in which photographs “of” are also photographs “after”, invoking photographers like Julia Margaret Cameron and Hervé Guibert, and Davey's son is both photographer and subject. So, the people in these portraits are both who they are and become figures haunted by other identities, which turn them into characters, or doubles, from a parallel universe of photographic reference.

The film, *Hemlock Forest*, ends with the film-maker moving away from the first person. She writes, and speaks, of herself as the “woman making this film” who finds herself directly addressing her son and his friends in her thoughts, and in a way that merges portrait and landscape, personhood and place: “you four – Barney, Eric, Euripedes, and Leo – in a house surrounded by woods and falling snow”. In this form of address, they become the “opposite of low-hanging fruit”. Photographing them enacts a fascination – not untouched by thoughts of voyeurism and the presumption of trust – that compels the photographer to draw upon her subjects' youthful “aliveness” to sustain her own hard-bought, but vital, apartness: “She feels alive when she's behind a camera, when she's shooting her own scenes, when she is making something.”

In *Wedding Loop*, Davey describes writers like Tolstoy and Guibert as “long-take writers”. They “circle back over the material again and again, each time refracted through a slightly altered prism”. She finds comfort in this repetition, and enacts it in her own work by circling back to these writers again and again. I link this circling back with the word, “loop”, which partakes of the security of endless return while moving toward something less comfortingly obsessive. In holding the Real within itself, while also running the risk of shutting the Real out, the structure of the loop replicates the ambivalence of the two kinds of nest that recur in Davey's work: the nest of reading and the nest of motherhood. Both are haunted by fears of emptiness, and become metaphorically identified with each other at the end of Davey's essay, *The Problem of Reading* (2003): “Recently on a frigid winter day, she found herself in her studio surrounded by layers of books and papers. From this mass of books and paper strewn all over the sunlit floor, she began to conjure up an image of it all coming together, the parts knitting themselves into a web or net capable of holding her in a sort of blissful suspension”. In spite of the safety of the third person, Davey stops herself short of elaborating on the fantasy of “maternal holding” at the heart of this description of her “cell” of reading and writing (where Bourgeois and Genet meet) as “something forgotten, something irresistible” to which she might “succumb”.

This is the ambiguity of interiority itself, with its promise of comfort and control, against which Davey asserts her commitment to what must remain difficult and comfortless. Removing herself from the rigours of the wedding in *Wedding Loop*, Davey sinks into the “solid comfort” of a warm bath in her mother’s dusty home, before returning to the familiarity of her apartment in New York. During the journey back home, she reads Simone Weil’s essay on the *Iliad*, in which Weil writes about Andromache preparing a hot bath for Hector without knowing that he has already died in battle. “Nearly all of the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths,” writes Weil, “Nearly all of human life, then and now, takes place far from hot baths.”

Between hot baths and empty nests, between holding on and letting go, lies the image of the “living Pietà”, fusing love and loss, art and life in an unexpected moment of closeness between mother and son: “he put his head in my lap like a living Pietà... I’d been dying to hold him in my arms and squeeze his flesh like the chubby baby he’d once been. I said, ‘You’re a nice guy to let me hold you like this’”. It is an image that can only be described, but cannot be shown. It came back to me as I watched *Wedding Loop*, in which Davey tells of her experience of a young passenger sitting next to her on the subway leaning into her in his sleep: “I could move but don’t. I support the upright part of his sleeping body with my body. I don’t look to see who he is, I don’t want to call attention...” A moment of accidental contact with the pressure of life, it is what the photographer – though not the writer – would have to let pass.

Aveek Sen