

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

MOUSSE

Dara Friedman "Perfect Stranger" at Pérez Art Museum Miami



Dara Friedman "Perfect Stranger" at Pérez Art Museum Miami, 2017-2018
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"Flying in the face of contemporary tendencies toward cool cynicism and overproduction, Dara Friedman offers a compact but dense oeuvre that crackles with intensity. Above all, there is an undercurrent of openness and earnestness, a radical sort of emotional availability," writes René Morales, the curator of Friedman's first comprehensive retrospective at Pérez Art Museum Miami, that includes 16 major works (16 mm and Super 8 films, HD and digital videos), from 1997 until today. Here, the artist speaks about filmmaking, intimacy, and the importance of being honest.

Barbara Casavecchia: After seeing your last video, *Dichter* (2016–17), where performers recite their favorite poem from their teenage years, I couldn't help thinking about the poem I myself loved, as much as I couldn't avoid thinking about my favorite song after seeing *Musical* (2007–8). I'd imagine both responses are side effects you've worked on very intentionally, in order to establish an emotional connection with the viewers. How important for you is the creation of this space of intimacy with a "perfect stranger," as your exhibition is titled?

Dara Friedman: Perhaps the role of the artist, what it is that we seem to be agreeing to, possibly even before we know that we have agreed to it, is to turn a light onto our innermost thoughts and experiences and share them with others who are essentially strangers. This makes the viewer intimately acquainted with who we are. Of course I am also interested in the exchange with others, be it the people I am working with or the viewer of the work—life as a conversation, not a monologue. Because if I am the only one speaking, there is no room for growth, or new experiences. I also like to listen. It fills me up. I know some things, but clearly not all things I am interested in understanding why and how do words work? What is the stuff of language? Vibration, sure, but where and how are the sound waves held in the body? At the same time, if you tell me the answers to these questions, I might nod, but



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I don't truly understand. I am the type of person who has to have the physical experience to understand something. I have to feel it to know it—fortunately or unfortunately. This need for intimacy also follows the spiritual questions. When I am told "ritual is very important, ceremony is important," then I don't want to be told why (which no one will tell you anyway, perhaps because words fail) but rather to feel it, and in feeling gain a close friendship with this knowledge. This was the beginning behind the work *Mother Drum* (2015-16). It taught me that some dance is a form of prayer, not "performed" for others, but rather "moved through" for others. Not a show, but rather a time of being. Anyway, this is all very intense and it is still not even eight in the morning. Barbara, what is your favorite poem and song?...

BC: Mine, from high school years? I still know them by heart, but I think they make sense only when I voice them aloud. I will do it when we meet in person, I promise. Since you just mentioned *Mother Drum*, can I ask you what brought to researching Native American cultures and rituals?

DF: I've realized recently that in film we're often dealing with the frame, the film frame or camera's "gate," as if moving through a window, a doorway. When I was introduced to Ishmael Golden Eagle Bermúdez, who in the 1960s started digging on his property in Miami's Brickell neighborhood and discovered the sacred spring of the ancient Tequesta by removing all the topsoil from his backyard, I began to realize that in the Western world we have physical doors and windows, but a portal into another place and time is in fact right beneath our feet, another direction to move through. It was my mother Gundula, an artist and maker of earthworks, who introduced me to the Miami Circle. Meeting Ishmael and learning his story opened my eyes to understanding my city as a geography. Later he brought me to an archaeological site on the north side of the Miami River where the relics of eleven structures are unearthed, together with bones of extinct Caribbean monk seals, pottery, and many other findings. Nobody seemed to care or really want to know, but to me it was like taking a book off your bookshelf that was always there, and actually reading it. I was very interested in Native American dancing and drumming and wanted to know about it, but I had no access. So I contacted people through the community board powwows.com. We communicated, and traveled great distances to meet up with each other. When the people danced or drummed, it was especially for my camera, separate from community events. The title *Mother Drum* comes from the large drum played by six to twelve people which is called the mother drum, its beat the Earth's heartbeat. Native Americans anthropomorphize planet Earth, and that knowledge—understanding that the Earth below our feet also has a body—is a great door to walk through.

BC: Was inverting the colors of the films you shot a way to introduce a distance? To do away with the documentary format?



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DF: When I came back with all that footage of dancers, the color fields were a way for me to eventually be present, to dance as well. It took me a while to figure that out. On the package of the film stock is printed "color negative," and the double entendre made me flinch. An inversion of color is perhaps like crossing over to another side, like an upside down world or internal world, as in Alice's *Through the Looking Glass*.

At the same time, color fields have always cropped up in my work. For an early film like *Jodie*, I looked for pure, nonobjective color—violet, green, blue—to uncover color in the layers of the film's emulsion through time and light exposure. In *Bim Bam* (1997) there are different color temperatures of light, while in *Dichter* the bright red-pink background behind all the performers works as a device for focusing attention, for framing and alerting perception.

BC: How were your last works received, and what do you think about the current debate on appropriation?

DF: The work I make is about entering into a relationship, and this can sometimes be a pretty long and drawn out process. So, you get to know each other. The process involves an honest exchange. If that isn't possible then the work isn't really possible. I ask permission and am respectful. And I feel that respect is returned. We can't and don't always have to understand— not understanding is sometimes really nice— but we do need to respect.

BC: How did you react to the idea of bringing together, like in chorus of voices and images, so many of your past works, for this exhibition?

DF: Seeing artwork on a computer screen is like sipping life through a straw. So seeing all the works together in *Perfect Stranger* is like allowing yourself to be exposed to the oxygen of the work. So that the molecules of your person can intermingle and unite with the molecules of the artwork. As to the immersive chorus of voices as you say, I think this is the idea of "we," you know, "me" and "me in you" and "me in yet another person" and so on, and of course the reverse, "you in me"—very sexy—that the "I" then is in fact both singular and plural. This is probably where the desire to work with others comes from. Film is a reflecting medium, and we look to see our reflection in the being of others. Then there is simply the idea of repetition. If something is worth saying once, it is worth repeating many times. I feel this is the case with artworks as well. If it is a good one, a good film, we return to it again and again throughout a lifetime, physically or in our minds. So the idea of showing many works together is perhaps like a book of mantras. Yes, one is certainly enough. But many works give you the broader scope of the message.



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BC: A few months ago I had the pleasure to attend the screenings of Peter Kubelka at Fondazione Prada in Milan, as well as to spend the evening with him and some friends. I think I finally understood better his idea behind "film and cooking"—the experience of doing something very refined with extremely basic ingredients, the economics and

freedom behind it all, the labor-intensive process of transformation involved, and the collective consumption of the results. This is perhaps a long way to ask you if and how his teachings have impacted your research, and how you interpret the notion of "participation"?

DF: Peter Kubelka, who took me on as a personal guest student, was/is a great teacher. I had met Hermann Nitsch in Salzburg, where I was visiting my mother when I was twenty years old. I was walking through the studios where Nitsch's students were painting, and he wanted to know who I was, and, well, what the hell... I told him I wanted to make films, and he gave me the telephone number of his friend Peter Kubelka, and I called him at home. I love a cold call. The interest in deconstructing a set of givens is a teaching of Peter Kubelka's that was in line with my own nature. When Kubelka talks about food, say a stew, he wants to know what beef is in the stew, how was it killed, where did it live, what did it eat in the meadow, did you look the animal in the eye? And this information is not learned from paper; you must go to the field, see the sunlight on the fur, look the animal in the eye, go to the slaughterhouse, eat the balls, slip on the fat that coats the floor, physically be there. By physically being there, the knowledge enters your body and you truly know. Kubelka is a sensualist and at the same time he deconstructs and is unemotionally analytical. It's a wonderful way to be. This way of living and making work, the marriage of the life of the mind to the life of the body—the Apollonian and Dionysian principles—is total. It's also deeply devoted to Truth. And the act of uncovering and revealing or searching for the Essence.

BC: Sensuality often comes into play in your work, although in very different ways, from the scrutiny of the beautiful body of a supermodel in *Jodie*, to people kissing on the streets of Rome in *Romance* (2001), or *Play* (2013), where couples enact closeness.

DF: Yes, perhaps I am one of those people who never grew up and out of the child's desire to slip between my parents when they are embracing. I want to be very close to the loving. Like cheek to cheek, super close.

BC: No sex involved?

DF: When I set out to make *Play* in Los Angeles, I thought I'd shoot a film about sex, but the artist Charlie White told me: "You have to be careful with it, honey: sex is for sale in this city. What you're really interested in is intimacy." He was absolutely right.

Casavecchia, Barbara. "Dara Friedman 'Perfect Stranger' at Perez Art Museum Miami". Mousse Magazine. 31 January 2018. Issue #61. Print/Web.

BC: Silence, nonverbal language, body language, dance—I've often tried to reflect on how women artists challenge mainstream canons when it comes to voicing themselves and their feelings (rage included, healing included). Do you think your relation to editing (what is left out, erased, silenced, repeated, et cetera) has any relation to that?

DF: Editing, again, is a physical-mental process. It is linked to breath, as it, in essence, manipulates the breathing pattern of the viewer. There is the Greek story of the Fates, the three sisters: Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who measures the length of the thread, the life (how many years is one arm length?), and Atropos, who cuts the thread, ending the life. Editing is this same fateful exercise. At the same time it is also puzzling, or orchestrating, like a conductor guiding instruments, directing fugues. Or seating people at a dinner table so that they will have interesting conversations. So there is a simultaneous brutality and generosity to the process. Creator and destroyer.

BC: Has your way of editing changed with time?

DF: When I first learned to edit, it was on an old-fashioned flatbed editing table where the film reels ran on spools and you physically chopped and taped the film. Now of course the process is digital and therefore very different. The change was like fluently speaking a language, and then having all the letters changed on you, plus adding many, many more. I am writing to you on a computer now, not a typewriter. The corrections happen in the blink of an eye. This change in process is of course physical and mental; I am sure it sets up new paths of neuroconnectivity in our brains. It is the internet, connectivity that mirrors the activity of the brain. We know things instantly and our knowledge is very broad, but perhaps not very deep. We are like hummingbirds now: so fast and agile, forward, backward, up, down, hovering, sipping, and then logging off. There is less deliberation and more thinking through doing. For me the amount of information and the speed is so intense, that when editing, every forty minutes or so, I have to take a little walk in the garden so that the information has a moment to enter. Like when you are pouring oil into a funnel into your car's engine, you have to pause a moment so the oil does not spill over the sides.

—Barbara Casavecchia