



Creepy the predecessor of Grotesque

an interview with Marnie Weber by Paulina Olowaska

Paulina Olowaska: To begin with, I'd like to ask you how do you feel about the word 'grotesque'? When you create your work, do you think about this term at all?

Marnie Weber: Initially I was more interested in 'creepy', which is very different from grotesque. Creepy is like the predecessor to grotesque. It's like you're

moving in a direction where it makes you feel uncomfortable. And yet it can be slightly amusing because I always try to hit that point between funny and dark, sad and amusing – it’s a real sweet spot that’s hard to hit. But then when you’re moving into the grotesque it becomes like this amplified passion, like a parallel or paradox between the dark and the light. To me grotesque is more of an extreme paradox, like a dramatic moment. Tragic, and funny at the same time.

PO: When I look at your works and films,

for example ‘The Sea of Silence’ with the ventriloquist dolls, there is a sense of something emotionally touching in there as well. A sympathy towards your characters. Would that be a closer aspect to grotesque?

MW: You become empathetic because women are so objectified already. That to me is the grotesque element in puppetry – the objectification and dumping of emotions onto these figures that aren’t alive. So another expression of grotesque is a distortion of reality, which is also a distortion of reality

as art. That’s why grotesque and art are so perfect together because they both challenge reality. The idea was that the Spirit Girls – who I imagined in my created narrative as having died – came back to life but never spoke. When we performed as the Spirit Girls we always wore masks and never spoke. And then I thought, well, how would they speak if they finally get their voice? Through ventriloquist dolls! So they each got a ventriloquist doll that matched their outfit. And when they finally got a chance to speak it was all jumbled and

distorted, like philosophy mixed with bar room jokes. What makes it grotesque in my mind, is the distortion that occurs when you’re being viewed by other people in the wrong manner and you don’t get to create your own persona. As a performance artist you create this persona and then you know people will project onto it.

For me, performance is really important in my art practice. I was exclusively performing between 1987 and 1993. During this period I was performing, making costumes, sets and props, as well as my own music. I strove to



move people emotionally. I later transitioned into making installations, movies and artwork. Of course I want to please myself in the work I make, but I aim to have someone walk into the room and feel emotionally moved. You'd think this is a standard aspiration but it actually isn't that typical in today's art world.

PO: I think that in contemporary art for a long time we've been told that there is a lot to read before we look and understand. I feel there is too little dialogue between art and spectator, that is created based on simple, child-like looking and absorbing, rather than referring to readings of art history. We are told in art schools that art is somewhat of a layered thing and a lot of students might be missing the point of this one-on-one passing on of a certain emotion. And this is exactly what I enjoyed in your films so much.

MW: Good to hear that they don't box you in.

PO: Many of your films create a series of stories that allow you to build some of the characters over years.

MW: Yes, especially with the Spirit Girls. I made four films about them over a period of six years, as well as a series of installations, and collages. When I first thought of the Spirit Girls they were a band of girls who died in the 70s and came back as spirits to put on their rock operas. Our first performance, in 2005,

was a rock opera with theatrical stage sets... Over the years we have played, we transformed into more of a rock show, still telling the story of the Spirit Girls. One of my goals with the Spirit Girls was to fill the void from when I was a teenager and there were very few female musicians; there certainly weren't many doing Theatrical Rock. I wanted a female Theatrical Rock band so I made one. Later, I wanted to explore a narrative of Witches and I just couldn't see how they could work together so I eventually put the Spirit Girls to rest with one final grand performance.

PO: When did you start exploring Witches in your art?

MW: About four years ago. My first foray was with my full-length movie called 'The Day of Forevermore'. I played the old witch lead character who oversaw a land of witches and monsters. Now I'm primarily working with Witches. They have a lot to do with my interpretation of the grotesque because of the whole history of being viewed as objects – a grotesque distortion of who they were which led to the rape and murder of suspected witches in history.

PO: Women have a much better understanding of the grotesque and a much closer idea of the real or the scary with periods, giving birth, getting old and so on. I'm finding more and more

that artists such as Valeska Gert or Dominika Olszowy, who work in the theme of grotesque, place the idea of the kitsch object beside the frame of a masterpiece. This makes me wonder, do you in your work ever build on an idea or a concept of an object as a prop for a film or an installation?

MW: To me a 'prop' can be heavily emotionally loaded. It can be a conduit to allow a performer to open up and create a real magical connection. It's almost like it opens the floodgates to emotions. And so when I discover a particularly curious and charged object and I get that tingly feeling, I know it is going to become a prop in one of my narratives. It is kind of an intuitive process but you have to have the emotional connection from the start. For instance I was using Sears catalogs in my work. My mother would buy clothes for me from them and when I found the catalogs I had a real emotional charge, and it wasn't just the thrill of the buy. They were heavily loaded with emotional symbolism that had so much to do with mother-daughter control issues for me.

PO: Do you talk with your daughter about your work? Does she like anything in particular, or does she have a special reaction to any of your work?

MW: We don't talk a lot about my art but it was a fascinating experience working together on my 'Day of Forevermore' movie in which she was a lead actor. In the film she played my fictional daughter, the young Witch. She looks a lot like me as a young girl and so over time I have come to realize that she was playing me as a young girl and I'm playing my mother as the Witch. I walked into that one not knowing, it went right by me. Sometimes you have to get deeply involved in things in order to get through them. The subconscious leads you **through these things and then the subconscious wants you to look at them afterwards. It is similar to how you look at your dreams for meaning. Making movies is the same thing for me – it's like a place where the subconscious can run free.**



