

Something Curated



Myths, Masks, and Mirrors: Marnie Weber's Enduring Archetypes

By Phoebe Ahern and Marnie Weber

Following their recent collaboration on *Whispering Silence*, a solo exhibition at Inspection Pit in West Sussex, artist Marnie Weber and curator Phoebe Ahern sit down to discuss some of the recurring themes in Weber's work — from ageing and femininity to the performance of identity. Together, they reflect on Weber's practice and how she subverts mainstream narratives, giving voice to women who exist in the shadows.



Bette Davis in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*, 1962. Publicity still. Photo:

Phoebe Ahern: Throughout your career, you often return to the figure of the older woman. What initially drew you to this character, and why do they continue to appear in your work?

Marnie Weber: As a child, fairytales were a big part of my life. I noticed the older women — crones, witches and hags — were the ones who held all the wisdom. I was drawn to them because I wanted to gain control, to feel some kind of magical power. I wanted to be something dark and powerful. The princess is always waiting to be saved.

PA: In *House of the Whispering Rose* (2025), we see a protagonist haunted by her younger self. What inspired you to explore this idea?

MW: I was thinking about the mask of youth and the mask of old age — and how both can be heavily made up. I used thick makeup, layers of it. This was inspired by how people talk about a “comeback”. It’s always a return to the heyday of youth, which is supposed to be the most exciting and important time of your life. But youth has its own struggles. The idea that being young means being happy and free is a myth — just like the idea that being old means you’re washed up and no longer useful.



Storyboard drawing by Marnie Weber, 2023, for *House of the Whispering Rose*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist



Whispering Rose, 2025 (film still).
Courtesy of the artist

PA: Were there any particular films that influenced this project?

MW: Several films inspired my portrayal of a washed-up starlet living in a mansion. First and foremost is *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) Bette Davis's character performs as her younger self — a child — because she never adapts her stage act to her age. She reenacts her childhood routines exactly as she did in the past and carries a doll as an effigy of herself. In my film, the younger self is played by a person, but she is portrayed as a doll-like caricature.

Other inspirations include Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Big Edie and Little Edie in *Grey Gardens* (1975), and the mother in *Requiem for a Dream* (2000). I wanted to work in this genre because it explores the intersection of darkness and glamour, as well as ageing and the idea of “fading beauty.” But I don't believe in fading beauty. I've always loved the character of Maude in *Harold and Maude* (1971) — she's old but joyful, wise, and full of life. You rarely see that. It's one of my favourite movies.



Marnie Weber, *Balloon Cloud*, 2025.

Courtesy of the artist and Inspection
Pit, West Sussex

PA: Baby Jane clings to her childhood fame even as her world unravels. What do you think her story reveals about society, and how it treats women as they age?

MW: Performers reflect the world at large — becoming stand-ins for what's happening in society. Bette Davis and Joan Crawford saw their roles in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* as comebacks. But even when women make

comebacks, the industry focuses on how they look: *Have they had surgery? How do they hold up?* Men aren't subject to the same kind of scrutiny. The conversation should be about the quality of work — how artists grow and deepen their craft. The dialogue surrounding female performers should be about the expansion of their artistry, not the preservation of their appearance.

This obsession with beauty and youth drives characters like Norma Desmond and Baby Jane to madness. It's unattainable. Isolation pushes them over the edge, but loneliness is the true catalyst for their descent. And this isn't just in the movies — it's everyday life for many older people. Having lived in LA for decades, I've seen how the world of Hollywood seeps into everything. Parts of LA are still incredibly glamorous, but others are clearly in decline.





Installation view, Marnie Weber:
Whispering Silence, curated by
Phoebe Ahern, Inspection Pit, West
Sussex, UK, 2025. Courtesy of the
artist and Inspection Pit, West
Sussex. Photo: Studio Adamson

PA: Do you think women retreat because they no longer feel attractive, or because the world stops paying attention to them? I'll never forget being at a bar and watching an older woman waiting to be served. It was as though she stood there forever, and eventually I offered to buy her a drink. No one else noticed her. It was such a small moment, but it felt quietly devastating.

MW: I used to go into the hardware store and see the faces of the men light up. Their faces don't light up anymore. There's a lot of conversation around women becoming invisible as they age. Maybe this invisibility is like a cloak that society throws onto older women. You start to take on the "role" you're

given, and then that role gets reflected back at you.

There's this myth that youth is the time when we're vital. But the truth is, older people carry the wisdom, the knowledge, and the lived experience. In the animal world that's celebrated — the oldest female whale always leads the pod. Age should be revered in the same way.



Marnie Weber, *Pussy Willows*, 2022.

Courtesy of the artist and Heidi
Gallery, Berlin

PA: Your characters live in these strange, desolate and decaying places with dreamlike interiors. What do these spaces represent for you?

MW: I consider interiors as stage sets — Jungian manifestations of the characters' subconscious. The interior becomes a cocoon, a security blanket. There's safety in the familiar, and fear of the unknown keeps you inside. In *House of the Whispering Rose* (2025), when Rose wanders through the mansion, and caverns are projected onto the walls, she's literally running through caves — symbolic of her subconscious: lost, disoriented, in a dark place. The house contains her darkest period, and the desolation drives her inward.

The exteriors tell a different story. These characters thrive when they step outside. In *Cabin of Mothra Crone* (2021) — the conceptual basis for my show *Sweet Ravaging Time* at Heidi Gallery, Berlin (2022) — she's shown at the dining table, drinking, isolated, and lonely. But outside, working as an artist, she comes alive — animated, expressive, invigorated. Or the sea hag in *Song of the Sea Witch* (2020) — when she leaves her cabin, she's with nature, fully alive, at one with animals and birds. Even at the end of *Whispering Rose*, when she's in the pool, there's a sense of joy again. The pink balloons represent that lightness.



Marnie Weber, *White Witch*, 2022.

Courtesy of the artist and Heidi
Gallery, Berlin

PA: In *Grey Gardens*, the Bouvier women turn their lives into a kind of theatre. Do you think there's a kind of power in self-mythologising?

MW: Definitely, yes. Because if the outside world isn't going to make you powerful, then you have to create that power yourself. Big Edie and Little Edie took on characters — they put on the mask of entertainment. You could see behind the curtain *and* in front of it.

Also, the setting mattered so much. It would've been so different — and much sadder — if they were in a small, hoardy house. But the fact that they were in a mansion? Not only did they lose their idea of “beauty” but they lost their financial status too. Their home was a shrine to faded glory.



Marnie Weber, *Song of the Sea Witch*,
2020 (Production still). Courtesy of
the artist

PA: You use dolls, masks, and stand-in figures for female characters. What draws you to this kind of expression?

MW: I took an acting class in the '90s because I had a great deal of stage fright when performing. When I was stuck on an emotion and couldn't express it in an authentic way, I was told to put on a blank mask — and somehow, the real emotion would pour out. It

was a very profound experience for me. I came away from it believing that masks can actually allow for real expression.

That idea fed into *The Sea of Silence* (2009) and the concept of *The Truth Speakers* — when the Spirit Girls haven't found their voice, so they use ventriloquist dolls to speak their truths, but they become confused. Their speech turns into a mix-mash of barroom jokes and deeply personal, philosophical thoughts — it's like their wires are crossed. They're trying to express something but haven't quite figured out how. In the end, the Spirit Girls leave their doll bodies behind — literally placing them on the shore — and walk into the ocean. It's a symbolic cleansing.





Marnie Weber, *The Sea of Silence*,
2009 (film still). Courtesy of the
collections of MAMCO, Musée d'art
moderne et contemporain, Geneva
and Le Musée des beaux-arts de La
Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. Photo:
Juliana Paciulli

PA: I love how your work moves between performance and ritual. Do you see performance as a form of confrontation, connection, or something else entirely?

MW: Live performance was a challenge to my bravery. I was attracted to confronting and overcoming the fear, and conquering it. Filmmaking is also a way of confronting my courage. There's a huge rush in involving other people in a crazy dream, whereas sitting at an easel and painting a picture is a personal challenge — but you don't get other people caught up in the madness of it all. I want to bring people along for the ride. Because if I put

myself out there, I hope to inspire others to take chances with their work.

As an artist I consider the audience, this comes from my years of performing. I make work to challenge myself, of course, but I don't see it as being in a vacuum. I can tailor my work to what I think would be exciting visually. When I do an installation or a film, my whole goal is to take people's breath away and evoke real emotion. I want a psychological connection.



Marnie Weber as Old Woman for
Songs from Intimacy Island, Los
Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions
(LACE), Los Angeles, 1989
(performance still). Courtesy of the
artist

PA: How do these characters experience transformation — or grapple with the process of change?

MW: My characters resist transformation at first, they hide away in isolation and create make-believe worlds. Ultimately, I believe the power of transformation is inherent in human nature and can't be denied. It's just something that happens; even if you resist it and have a breakdown, you're still going to transform. I believe human beings are naturally meant to change and grow, and this can happen at every stage of life. You're meant to emerge from the cocoon.

PA: I see women in your work longing for recognition — or visibility — through performance, memory, or even magic. What do these concepts mean to your characters?

MW: If I tap dance hard enough and fast enough, will somebody notice me? Or do I need to live in the past and regain my youth? Or, through magic, do I have to trick people into seeing me? Witches operate like this — they're always behind the scenes, doing their magic.

Rose puts on her makeup so that when she looks in the mirror, she can remember when

she was young and vital. Or maybe there's the anticipation that someone will visit her. She throws this birthday party, but no one comes. Symbolically, she wants to celebrate herself — but no one is there.



Marnie Weber as Old Lady Poodle
for *Poor Them*, Norrtälje Konsthall,
Sweden, 2000 (production still).
Courtesy of the artist

**PA: There's a tension in your characters
between hiding and revealing, control and
vulnerability —**

MW: I like to explore both the dark and the light — the sad and the funny, the controlled and the vulnerable. It's the tension between opposites that makes things interesting. I like that feeling when you're not sure whether to laugh or cry. There's no safe space in that uncanny, in-between zone. Your brain can't decide: *Is this scary? Is this funny?* It's a liminal space, and that creates a kind of unease. It's those in-between spaces where people can really insert themselves, and raising questions tends to open people up to more discussion than just giving them answers.

Marnie Weber lives and works in Los Angeles, CA, and Milford, CT. She is represented by Heidi Gallery, Berlin. Her work was the subject of a retrospective at Magasin, Grenoble, and a 25-year survey exhibition at MAMCO (Musée d'art moderne et contemporain), Geneva. Weber's work belongs to public collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Musée d'art contemporain de la Haute-Vienne, France; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; FRAC Paris; MAMCO, Geneva; and Le Musée des Beaux-Arts de La Chaux-de-Fonds. In addition to her visual art practice, Weber is a musician. She first emerged as part of the early Los Angeles punk scene before transitioning into performance art and filmmaking, and has since released numerous solo albums.