

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored top, looks directly at the camera with a neutral expression. In front of her is a white birthday cake with several lit candles. To her left, the back of a person with long brown hair is visible. Further left, the profile of a woman with blonde hair is seen. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the candles on the cake.

**Bodies
Without Verdict:
On the Obscenities
and Opacities of
JORDAN STRAFER.**

**NEVER
FULLY A BODY**

interview by
Davide Andreatta

Jordan Strafer's practice unfolds in the interstices of cinema and installation, where juridical spectacle, familial psychodrama, and cultural memory collapse into a theater of surfaces, surrogates, and suspensions. Her works stage trials without verdicts, narratives without closure, and families without reconciliation.

Populated by dolls, prosthetic masks and effigies, Strafer's films present figures that are never fully bodies, but rather citations of bodies. In this refusal of realism, one encounters both the grotesque and the tender – a refusal that destabilizes any fantasy of a “true” subject, instead laying bare the mechanics of power, desire, and abjection.

If Strafer borrows from the registers of melodrama, camp, and horror, it is never in the service of catharsis nor in the search for the origin of punishment and cruelty. Instead, affect loops and mutates, leaving the spectator stranded between laughter and horror, identification and alienation. Time in her works is not linear but recursive, a looping temporality that mimics both trauma's repetitions and law's deferrals, suggesting that justice, like memory, is perpetually postponed.

What is striking in Strafer's practice is not simply the exposure of violence – juridical, familial, institutional – but the way it is rendered through surfaces of desire and theatricality, never reducible to denunciation or redemption. If there is a politics here, it resides not in the assertion of truth but in the insistence on opacity, the staging of loopholes in meaning where power and desire circulate without resolution.



**“From my
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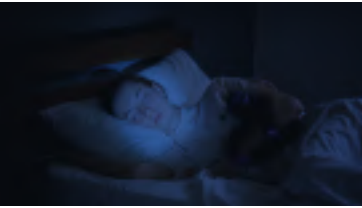
In your films, what appears most forcefully is often what cannot be said or shown: gaps in testimony, missing mothers, obscure juridical rituals...Could we think of your work as staging the loophole not only as a legal or narrative device, but as the very structure of meaning itself, where truth is perpetually deferred, suspended in a gap between speech and the articulation of silence?

Yes, I think you could say that. I heard somewhere, many times, that artists remake the same piece over and over. Ultimately, what drives my work is the impossibility or unutterability of “truth”.



Your recurring return to juridical mise-en-scène suggests the trial as a paradigmatic stage where language, power, and embodiment collapse into performance. In these settings, do you see justice as already displaced by spectacle, the subject reduced to what Judith Butler might call a “performance of legitimacy” before a normative gaze?

My parents were both criminal defense attorneys in Miami, and I learned from a very young age the farce of justice and the problems of morality. I see justice as a form of fiction, and the justice system as essentially a combination of language, precedent and theater. The trial interests me from the perspective of storytelling. Right now, I’m especially interested in the clash of sentiments between wanting to completely abolish the prison system/punishment altogether and the irreconcilability of violence between people. We desire the theater of the justice system, I suppose, to help quell that desire we all have for fairness, even if it’s mostly not real and rarely fair. There is a satisfaction that people feel when people get punished. But the system’s foundations are in slavery, rape, and puritanism, so how could it possibly provide real justice? I don’t mean to sound so cynical, but I do see the impossibility of a true answer. I also want all of us to question how our moral values as a society come from Christianity (I’m speaking about the US justice system).



Critics have pointed to the spectral figure of the mother across your trilogy (*PEP*, *SOS* and *PEAK HEAVEN LOVE FOREVER*). Beyond autobiography, could we think of this absence as a structural abjection, an expulsion that enables subjectivity, yet continually returns in uncanny form, whether as grotesque surrogate, obscene excess, or melancholic void? Is somehow the incorporation of this absence a form of witnessing and the denial or puritanistic reparation?

From my experience of having a mother, I think mothers ultimately fail—and that isn’t fair to them or their children. That’s one of the reasons I am somewhat on board with anti-natalism and voluntary human extinction. I had a complicated relationship with my mother; until I was around 18 or 19, we did not really get along. She died when I was 23, and that is also around the time I started getting very serious about making art. Losing my mother and beginning to truly commit to art at the same time made these two things even more linked, perhaps, than they would have been. The first video works I made in undergrad were videos of me performing as possessed/pregnant with her ghost. During that time, I was in a very basic way getting interested in some psychoanalytic theory like object relations via Melanie Klein, and thinking through this lens as a starting point helped to organize and alter the approach to my work so the “mother” symbol felt even more pertinent. My father was gay, and thinking about patriarchy as a whole, I was also thinking about my family like a double patriarchy, with the maternal side missing as a kind of metonymy for society at large. My work as an artist started there and continues outward.

Across your work, obscenity functions less as shock or gratuitous provocation than as a procedural logic that implicates the viewer in the dynamics it stages. It seeps into the very grammar of the image, where desire and degradation become indistinguishable. Might it be read as a mechanism through which desire, violence, and ethical ambivalence are enacted, such that spectatorship itself becomes a site of complicity, a rehearsal of social transgression and corporeal engagement, where critique and participation are inseparably intertwined?

Yes, cruelty between people is a sticking point that I keep coming back to. I don’t want to make work that shows the world I want to see, rather, I want my work to show the way the world actually is. I just feel devastated all the time. Misogyny is so present all the time. Violence is intolerable, unfathomable and unavoidable... The psychic space of ambivalence between all these things you mention is where I work from. I’m not looking for answers. I’m regurgitating it all up together in different configurations over and over again like a meditation. I’m just hoping to find an insight or offer a contribution.



Jordan Strafer, *No Spank*, 2024, super 16mm single channel film with sound, 10 min 21 sec
Jordan Strafer, *PEAK HEAVEN LOVE FOREVER*, video still, 2021
Jordan Strafer, *PEAK HEAVEN LOVE FOREVER*, production still, 2021. Photography Mariana Sanchez



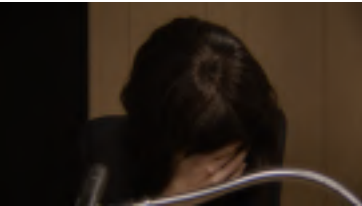
The dolls, prostheses, and masks that populate your films refuse the supposed singularity and autonomy of the human subject. They hover between fetish, effigy, and void. Do these surrogate bodies protect intimacy, or do they reveal that the “real” body is always already a performance of surfaces, the spoiled portion of the screen? By doubling, masking, or fragmenting characters, you unsettle identification. The viewer is never really allowed an unmediated empathetic bond. Can we read this as a politics of opacity, one that resists both moral mastery and sentimental absorption, insisting instead on the instability of subjecthood?

Originally, I started using dolls and masks for various reasons, including their immediacy, affordability, and the genuine fun they bring. I like to try to access the part of my childhood self, who embarrassingly was exploring on some level my own body sexuality through dolls, like making them do weird things and not really knowing yet what anything means, but just acting libidinally. I think a lot of children have similar experiences and we don't talk about it because we learn to be embarrassed by this phenomenon. Children can be so, I don't know, disgusting, but also it's fascinating and a shame that we shut it down so completely. I want to be in touch with that part of myself because I think it's a genuinely creative part that usually goes into hiding, and regardless of whether we acknowledge it, I think most of us have a part of ourselves in hiding. I tell myself that if what I make feels embarrassing, then that's a good sign.



There are more reasons for the dolls, masks, prosthetics, splitting, and so on. I also wanted to be the identity implicated in the work, and I didn't want the individuals' performing identity to be implicated, especially because in some way I make all my characters 'bad.' When I started making videos involving performers, it felt to me at the time like a hypothetically ethical question. But as the work progressed and my productions got bigger with more live actors, and my understanding of representation and identity evolved, I realized I really love working with professional actors and this opens up a whole new world. Yet I don't want to lose the sense of the characters being transferable. Actors, as opposed to dolls, can't be as controlled, and therefore they provide things that I couldn't have imagined, which is a relief and opens up the work for me. Whereas with the dolls for example, everything about them has to be decided in advance.

I guess the actors in my work are kind of hybrid/dolls at times. Recently, I have been working with as many prosthetics as my productions can afford (I always want more) in my work to try to keep some of the aspects of the dolls, mainly I like the idea of a set of archetypes in a story that could be interchanged with one another. I want the characters to be like projection screens that we can project ourselves into or other similar ideas or people. They are never exactly what I want them to be, but perhaps that's what makes them more true. This is something about psychoanalytic theory that has always interested me, the focus on the archetypes of the nuclear family as a metaphor. Like Lacan talks so much about the “Breast”, but I would say that the breast is symbolic and can mean several things, especially in queer family structures. I stick with that kind of understanding of archetypes in my work because it resonates with me.



The voice in your films often appears disembodied, distorted, or ventriloquized, suggesting a juridical register where sound itself testifies. How do you conceive of the sonic as a site where evidence, affect, and unconscious leakage converge, destabilizing the visual's authority as bearer of truth?

Different forms of voicelessness have been an element in my work ever since I can remember. Two early influences on this theme are the first scene in Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*, when a young boy is being treated for a stutter and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, where an actress is treated for having lost her speech. I find that voice recordings on their own have a very powerful and emotionally impactful quality. Barthes wrote about photographs as having a poignant element, a “punctum”; I think of voice recordings in a similar way. Sound is intimate and penetrating. The inherent characteristics of sound make it, in some ways, more potent than images. The power in recorded sound, I feel, is accentuated when it is displaced, removed, or otherwise altered.

Jordan Strafer, *LOOPHOLE*, video still, 2023
Jordan Strafer, *LOOPHOLE*, production still, 2023. Photography Alan Martin Segal
Jordan Strafer, *DECADENCE*, video still, 2024







Jordan Strafer, *SOS*, 2021. 11:08 minutes (video still)



Linear temporality dissolves in your works – events loop, double, or bleed across historical registers. Might we read this disjunctive time as trauma's repetition compulsion, or as the juridical deferral in which justice is endlessly postponed? What happens when narrative time itself becomes a carceral mechanism?

I definitely think about these things you mention with the linear temporality of the works; its formal implication and as a mirror of how I experience the “truth”. I also want to take advantage of the looping form of video art when possible. I would argue that the loop is the number one key difference between video art and cinema. It provides major opportunities for manipulation of narrative/experience that don't exist in a regular theatrical screening format.

From No Spank to *MERCY NO NO*, you stage architectures of discipline, institutions that regulate female adolescence through punishment, surveillance, and internalized control. How do you see these spaces dramatizing the production of gendered subjects, caught between subjection and resistance?

Those two films for me are like practice runs for a future film I want to make that takes place in an environment like a behavior modification school for teenagers. The original concept is autobiographical; I spent the majority of my high school years in a behavior modification program. In *MERCY NO NO* I simply adapted the prompt of that setting to re-enact scenes of Joan alone in her cell from Bresson's *Trial of Joan of Arc*. For *No Spank*, I knew I wanted to make a scene of a girl hiding coins in her vagina, as this had been a scene in my head for a long time, based on one of these strange formative childhood memories. I was very lucky to have access to this incredible location, a former boarding school in Spetses Island in Greece, and I adapted the rest of the narrative of that story to that location while implementing some ideas that I had collected over the years. Because of the style of the building, that work took on a more giallo look. With both of these works and the future works along these lines, I am also thinking about children's rights as a topic I want to go deeper into. The “school” or “program” in my mind is also like a miniature, so to speak, of a justice system or a sense of justice embedded in our society.

Your borrowing from soap operas and thrillers seems less nostalgic than diagnostic. Do you see melodrama's excess, with its tears, repetition and artificiality, as a degraded genre recuperated for critique, or as a privileged mode for exposing the libidinal economy of power and desire?

Both. There's also an element of fun and play involved in invoking this kind of media, at least for me. At the end of the day, we all go home and watch trash TV, and inevitably we're seeing the world through the lens of all the media we consume. It's not a new idea, but I am on board with the democratization of high and low media. I think the artificiality of melodrama and low horror/thriller also mediates some of the other harder-to-swallow things I am trying to get to that would otherwise be unwatchable, in my opinion. Pleasure is important to me.



Jordan Strafer, *PEP (Process Entanglement Procedure)*, 2019, Video Still
Jordan Strafer, *MERCY NO NO*, 2023, Single channel video with four channel audio, Super 16mm; 6 minutes 30 seconds