

ARTFORUM

Carissa Rodriguez
By Rachel Churner — April 2018



Carissa Rodriguez, *The Maid*, 2018, 4K video, color, sound, 12 minutes 22 seconds.

SCULPTURECENTER

The production quality of Carissa Rodriguez's twelve-minute 4K video *The Maid*, 2018, is as impeccable as its main characters—Sherrie Levine's crystal and black-glass "Newborns," 1993–95. Commissioned for Rodriguez's first solo exhibition at a New York museum and projected onto a screen suspended at a tasteful diagonal in the center of SculptureCenter's cavernous main gallery, *The Maid* tracks Levine's sculptures over the course of a day, with brooding shots of the works in several upscale homes. In one scene, white-gloved attendants delicately remove a pristine, protective cloth from the sculpture, as if unswaddling it, before placing it on a pedestal at an auction house. The pulsing ambient soundtrack, as beautifully generic as any in a trailer for a high-budget thriller, is matched by stunning drone footage that pulls back from a high-rise apartment to reveal Manhattan's Upper East Side on a snowy day, and hovers outside a sun-drenched home in the Los Angeles hills. Money, and the perfection it can buy, is a subject in both content and form.

With her choice of protagonists, Rodriguez declares reproduction her other major concern. Levine's *Crystal Newborn*, 1993, and *Black Newborn*, 1994, were, of course, made after Constantin Brancusi's *Newborn*, produced in marble in 1915 and in bronze in 1920. Brancusi's sculpture mobilized the metaphor of birth for the moment of creation; Levine's appropriations, which reproduce the exact shape (what Catherine Ingraham has evocatively called "Brancusi's skin") while rendering it in different materials and at a slightly reduced scale, productively complicated such notions of reproduction and regeneration.

Rodriguez's film documents how flawless Levine's "children" are—the crystal "Newborns" practically glow from within, while the black-glass ones are honed to a sheen that denies interiority—but also how neglected, abandoned to the sterility of mirrored tables. In her practice, Rodriguez has consistently interrogated the complex relationships between artists and collectors (both private and institutional) to illuminating ends. But this film, about the afterlife of a sculpture after another sculpture, might have felt a little too cold, a little too meta, were it not for the title's reference to a 1913 short story by Robert Walser. "The Maid" is only a page long, but it delivers a clear articulation of maternal desire that in turn provides Rodriguez's use of the "Newborns" with a supplemental logic; the calculated conceptualism of the work is counterbalanced with intense emotion. In the Swiss writer's story, a maid is charged with looking after a child who is "pure as freshly fallen snow and as lovable as the sun." The child is lost, and the caregiver searches for decades for her charge, only to "die of joy" upon finding her. Taking its cues from Walser, *The Maid* refracts the oft-rehearsed tale of Levine's reproduction explicitly through the lens of motherhood.

A series of five small gelatin silver prints of embryos, hung unassumingly along a side wall and titled "All the Best Memories are Hers," 2018, pushes the theme home. Taken with an EmbryoScope, an incubator that provides time-lapse images of fertilized eggs to better track development, the images play a similar double game. While raising questions about the uneasy lines between property and personhood, these photographs also deploy the deep desires and often painful longing that such images, which have been billed by fertility clinics as "the first photo of your baby," evoke.

At the end of "The Maid," Walser's delicate description of his main character is interrupted by the narrator. "Why did she die? Did that do her any good?" he asks. The abrupt intrusion of practicality adds a tinge of cynicism to the fairy tale, and by extension to Rodriguez's show. I couldn't escape the feeling that this was the sentence that Rodriguez connected with most: She found what she was looking for, but it didn't do her any good after all. It's a disheartening thought that, after a sleepless night, even a parent could relate to.