

ARTFORUM

Interviews: Carissa Rodriguez
As told to Laura Hoffmann— March 8, 2018



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

*Titled after a 1913 Robert Walser short story in which a caregiver looks for her lost charge, Carissa Rodriguez's *The Maid*, 2018, is a lusciously produced video and forms the centerpiece of the artist's first solo museum exhibition in New York. The work follows six iterations of Sherrie Levine's 1993–94 sculpture *Newborn*, as found in their current homes. Here, Rodriguez discusses making the piece, which is on view at SculptureCenter until April 2, 2018.*

OVER THE YEARS, I kept returning to Sherrie Levine's *Newborn* works. They first appeared in an exhibition in 1993 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, curated by Ann Temkin, for which Levine was asked to engage the permanent collection. She made a mold of Constantin Brancusi's iconic *Le Nouveau Né* (*Newborn*) and cast several copies or "derivatives" in crystal and black glass. The idea for using glass, I believe, was taken from Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, which is also housed in the collection. Each of the *Newborn* works sat atop its own baby grand piano. It was a severe, elegant, and minimalist display; it had a ton of pathos and an abundance of metaphors. Is the sculpture an egg, an embryo, a crying baby's head? It's a shape that symbolizes a beginning, for sure. This singular thing carved by hand became an entity that could be infinitely reproduced. Levine was the medium by which Brancusi and Duchamp—two forebears of divergent versions of modernism—"fathered" a single work together. I totally latched onto what Temkin described as Levine transforming the museum into a "maternity ward" to raise questions of paternity within art history.

The camera work for *The Maid* was provisional. We approached each site cold, as we weren't given any images of the locations prior to our shoots. We filmed in three collectors' homes (one on the Upper East Side in New York, one in the Hollywood Hills, and one in the suburbs of California); a museum (the Los Angeles County Museum of Art); and an auction house (Christie's). I didn't want to make a dry didactic inventory, and in the end I threw out all of the tripod shots and stuck with our Gimbal shots, which were filmed in slow motion. There's something floating and hypnotic about the scenes, like rocking a baby. I edited the video with my friend, the artist Jason Hirata. It was revelatory for me to shave scenes frame by frame to make them fit together; it was like sculpting, with time.

In working on the soundtrack, I was playing with artifice and with how music can make you experience the same scene in a radically different way. The amplified room tone in the first part is quite subtle, but it drives the action forward; it's a way of building momentum while also leaving some space for the viewer's mind to fill in the gaps. The last third of the film is when the music kicks in. It was made by the musician Gobby. I gave him some audio samples as cues. The music is emotional and sometimes feels a bit over the top. I wanted to put that emotion in quotation, and to foreground the cinematic apparatus, while turning up the affective qualities too. I'm interested in this duality.

You can cast sculptures, but you can also cast actors. I sometimes imagined the shoots as casting calls. I saw the Newborn works as the protagonists of some internal drama; there is a melancholy and a loneliness that surrounds them. The curator of the show, Ruba Katrib, joked about how they reminded her of *Little Orphan Annie*, while someone else mentioned *Citizen Kane* because of the snowy scenes and the fictional conceit of the "poor little rich child" who finds their way into an opulent home—but where is the love? For me, the Newborn sculpture in one of the final scenes is the ingénue, giving her best performance for the camera in a kind of star-is-born moment.

I didn't fully experience the mastery of Newborn's form until I encountered it firsthand when we were filming. More than any one medium, I am interested in the transactional aspect of art, which is probably informed by my experiences as a dealer and gallerist. I never had a studio practice or a designated space for experimenting in a monastic way with materials that is free from the systems of art, which is not to say my work isn't also interior or personal. I happen to be interested in the conditions through which an artwork is able to appear and, by extension, the artist. In this way, I'm exploring subjecthood and what constitutes who we are as social beings. Video lends sculpture a kind of subjectivity. Narrativizing the Newborn works through a time-based medium was a way of seeing it vacillate between subject and object. That was sort of my attempt. Sculpture is a three-dimensional, tangible thing, but when rendered cinematically it becomes two-dimensional—an image, a surface. I decided to project it onto a two-sided screen in order to let the viewer move around it and experience it from different angles.

Some have said that doing a show with me can lead to unexpected challenges. Part of the working process was to give SculptureCenter the task of sourcing all of the Newborn pieces. Levine cast twelve crystal version of Newborn and twelve black ones. In the production time of this film, which was a couple of months, we were able to film six of them. Some collectors and museums declined. By coming up against certain limits and formalities, you begin to understand the contours of the project while also generating meaning. The correspondence is very interesting—how the curatorial staff reached out and the responses they received. I think of it as a materialist approach in a way. For me, it's the only realistic political way of working, as opposed to making empty claims about content. Jean-Luc Godard once said, "The problem is not to make political films, but to make films politically." We have this much money, we have this much time, we have this much access—that's what will determine what we get to see. It sounds terribly unromantic, but it doesn't have to be.