

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Richard B. Woodward, "UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991-2015' Review: It's All About Her-And Us," *The Wall Street Journal*, September, 2016

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

'UH-OH: Frances Stark 1991-2015' Review: It's All About Her—And Us

Humor and intellect make for a joyful exhibit of oversharing.



'Push' (2006), by Frances Stark PHOTO: WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART/COURTESY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON.

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The mid-career retrospective “UH-OH: Frances Stark **1991-2015**” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, brings together more than **100** varied works by the **Los Angeles**-based artist (b. **1967**) that test the limits of confessional humor as a binding principle for a life’s work.

The exhibition’s title alludes to those awkward times when you suspect you may have said or done something untoward. Ms. Stark’s persona—expressed in drawings, collages and sculptures, as well as computer-generated videos—is that of a shameless narcissist. She is the friend who expects you will be eager to learn everything she thinks because she finds her own mind so fascinating.

In the bemused words of Ali Subotnick, the curator from the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles who organized this traveling show, Ms. Stark tends to “overshare.” Were she deadly serious, or an airhead, the results might be unbearable. As she is instead a funny observer of herself and art history, and a vulnerable performer with one eye always fixed on her audience, her show is dotted with captivating moments that make up for the ones when you wish she would share a little less. Walking through the galleries, we learn that she likes art, philosophy, online sex with men, fashion, weighty authors (the writings of Goethe, Henry Miller, T.S. Eliot, Witold Gombrowicz and David Foster Wallace form the basis for pieces here) and all kinds of music, from California punk bands and Tupac to Radiohead and Mozart. (Music stands are a visual motif in her oeuvre.) Ms. Stark reflects on these topics in a variety of knotty Conceptual modes that may seem unpredictable but are in some respects tightly controlled. None of her materials are precious. Her videos are made with simple computer graphics. Language is the wellspring of her art. Costing nothing and democratically possessed, it’s used for visual structure, in lines and blocks of text, and for storytelling or puns. (Her family’s livelihood centered on communications. Her mother was a telephone operator and her father was an electrical engineer in the printing business, biographical threads that she has woven into several pieces.)

The early works here are notations on paper about books. In “W is for Werther” (1996), a Minimalist take on Goethe’s epistolary tragic novel “The Sorrows of Young Werther,” the initial refers both to the title character and the icon for Microsoft Word. (The files from the program are printed to make one of the bottom layers on the sheet.) Her graphic style can be crude or soignée. The chorus girls with parasols that appear in several works (2007-08) are elegantly patterned, in the manner of Japonisme or Aubrey Beardsley. Three large mixed-media panels here—“Push,” “Pull after ‘Push’” and “Push after ‘Pull after Push’” (2006-2010)—depict a studio interior in a slick Pop manner, with doors marked “push” and “pull,” Mylar windows and a female figure reclining on a divan. (Don’t expect to parse the meaning easily.

Only after reading Howard Singerman’s catalog essay did I learn that the playful titles allude to Hans Hoffman’s theories of color, male dominance of Abstract Expressionism, and the tugging conflict that Ms. Stark felt between commitment to her art and to motherhood.) Most viewers during my visit clustered in the room where “My Best Thing” (2011) was playing. This computer-graphics rendition of online conversation with an Italian artist—both of them cartoon-like children—highlights the kooky charms of Ms. Stark’s art: her openness, self-deprecation, candor about female lust, philosophic curiosity, and unconventional storytelling.

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Ms. Stark's 'Pull after "Push"' (2010) PHOTO: GREENGRASSI, LONDON/ROBERT WEDEMEYER/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

She excerpts Fellini's "8½" in discussing her own crisis in making art while thinking too much about sex. (The piece can be found on Vimeo.) As with much of her art, it tries your patience, running more than 1½ hours. The videos of her cats run 47 minutes. Another of her son at age 4, grooving to David Bowie on her laptop, is only 10 minutes but seems endless.

Her most ambitious work here is one of her latest and briefest. "Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention Is Free" (2013) is a multichannel video projection against an inkjet mural, with take-away posters, and a pounding rap soundtrack, that presents the education of an imaginary protégé/alter ego, Bobby Jesus. A complicated homage to L.A.'s African-American figures whose aggressive and inventive styles of language, music and fashion have helped to define her and her city for the world over the past 30 years, it's also a frank admission—by a former University of Southern California art professor—that she owes more to them than she has given.

Like many postmodern artists, Ms. Stark layers her work in irony and theory. Luckily, it hasn't yet hardened into superiority. While her contemporaries Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince are so knowing in their attitude toward art and culture that they seem to scorn their audience, she remains relatively defenseless and exposed. Her fame is more local than international.

Bravo to the MFA for a serious show by an artist who hasn't been sanctioned by every blue-chip collector or backed by a powerful New York gallery. The art world would be healthier if this happened more often.