

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dennis Cooper, "Frances Stark," *Artforum*, April, 1997

ARTFORUM

APRIL 1997

OPENINGS

FRANCES STARK

DENNIS COOPER

THE DAY I WALKED THROUGH "The Power of Suggestion," LA MoCA's recent survey of drawings by young American artists, there was a pack of high schoolers on a field trip. They moved from room to room, gathering in campfirelike semicircles around each piece. Their teacher, a balding gent with a mildly cultured air, would ask them what they thought so-and-so was attempting to convey, and they would mostly try to come up with elegant ways of saying, "It's weird but kind of cool," over and over. All except for a handful of artsy teens near the back, who maintained a tightlipped nonchalance. Then the group reached Frances Stark's *Untitled (Goethe)*, 1995, four interrelated works on paper consisting of text fragments from Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, lightly traced out in purplish-blue carbon. Although the drawings were as prim, cryptic, and seemingly adult as the other art in the show had been bouncy, explosive, and seemingly youthful, the artsy clique suddenly came to life, rhapsodizing and gesturing in a way that seemed to flummox their teacher and fellow students. Their buzz of "amazing" and "I know what she means" had a rapt sincerity so at odds with their grooveball demeanor that it made me wonder.

"Maybe they responded passionately," says Stark, "because that's what I'm doing in a lot of my work—having a kind of love affair with an artist's voice. I'm not interested in the texts I use necessarily. . . . I'm not a fan of Goethe or *Werther*. When I first read the novel, I thought it was boring. I'm just fascinated by the construction of interiority. And maybe those kids were responding to the work's touch, because it's not creepy or ironic."

Stark is part of that sparkling group of relatively recent Art Center College of Design graduates who are just now coursing through the art world—Sharon Lockhart, T. J. Wilcox, and Joe-Mama Nitzberg among them. Art Center is a school famously besmitten with French theory (i.e., its recent sponsorship of the ravey Baudrillard "Chance" conference), and Stark, like the best of her fellow alumni, is a reluctant disciple. Formally, the visual patterning of her work is so reduced that it seems to require an instruction manual, until, that is, one notices its reference points—Goethe, Emily Dickinson, the Beatles—whereupon her tight lines and seemingly precious arrangements become almost unbearably tender and parochial, and the field of emotionally magnetized pop-cultural particles organizes into a radiant code. At heart, she is the sadder, wiser descendant of every grade-schooler who ever mindlessly emblazoned her or his notebook cover with stars' names and rock lyrics. She has merely clarified the impulse—and refined the practice into an art so obsessive and fragile that it seems to emanate all the wistfulness in the world.

"Like in the pieces I did about the Beatles," Stark says, referring to her characteristically spare drawings, some gigantic, some tiny, in which a timeline of the band's career that Stark found in a press kit for the film *Backbeat* was meticulously traced with carbon paper, cut up, and arranged in lonely-looking blocks of text. "To me, the Beatles are the definition of modern fame, and that's about it, as far as what they mean at this point in time. I wasn't thinking about them really. I was thinking about the typist sitting at a computer in some office hurriedly typing out the same Beatles timeline that had been printed a zillion times before. It was

GLADSTONE GALLERY

full of the kinds of mistakes that you could only make on a computer, and I loved that. The sloppiness, the reduction of something that had once been the biggest, most sexualized, hottest, craziest fucking thing in the world into this chronology that didn't even mean anything anymore. I think of those lines as brushstrokes in a way. I repeat some of them just because they have awesome typos."

Like a good many Los Angeles artists past and present, Stark likes to have a number of media at her disposal. She is a writer of lush experimental fiction that has appeared in a number of anthologies and journals. She has sung and played in rock bands, including lo-fi cult favorites Palmetto and Layer Cake. She is the anonymous rotating "model" in Charles Ray's *Fashions* film, and stars as Yoko Ono in Raymond Pettibon's forthcoming feature-length video, *The Holes You Feel*. She even makes a medium out of fandom; Xerox copies of her dense, needy, verbose letters to favorite rock stars like Pavement's Steve Malkmus and Sebadoh's Jason Loewenstein have appeared in both her visual art and her fiction. It's telling that when she speaks to artists whose work means the world to her, she can only go on obsessively about herself, but when she deals with the work itself, she can barely even alter the originals. Stark is a kind of respectful customizer, tweaking assembly-line typefaces until they become disembodied, secondary manuscripts in which her admiration, envy, and romantic projections fuse with her heroes' genius.

"In a way," says Stark. "I'm trying to re-create that feeling of how you can stare at 500 pictures of George Harrison or Jason Loewenstein or whoever, and you can feel so close, but then so far. It's just that I'm interested in working with language, not with visual images. . . . I just love how literature can be mimetic and revealing at the same time." Stark's work makes that love visual and wholly remarkable.

Dennis Cooper's novel Guide (Grove) is scheduled for June publication.