

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Leah Ollman, "The mind and art of Frances Stark," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 2010

Los Angeles Times

The mind and art of Frances Stark

The artist's fascination with the visual and the verbal, and with looking and creating, comes through in an extensive show of her work at MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

December 26, 2010 | By Leah Ollman, Special to the Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Cambridge, Mass. — Frances Stark's right arm is as good a place as any to begin to consider what drives the artist and writer. She sports two tattoos there, one an ornate foliate pattern based on a Louis Sullivan drawing, inked near her shoulder when she was in college, during the "five minutes" she aspired to be an architecture critic. The other, on her inner arm just above the elbow, reads "Me Edith," in simple cursive. Edith was her grandmother, an avid amateur photographer. "There's a sepia-tone print of her in a bathing suit looking really cute," Stark explained. "She was a big woman, but she wasn't so enormous when she was 16, or however old she was in the picture. I think she thought no one would recognize her, so what she did was lean the picture on the vinyl tablecloth and take a Polaroid of it. She wrote on the back, 'Me Edith.'"

Stark, 43, discovered the Polaroid in the late '80s, just as she was learning about Cindy Sherman's multiplicitous self-portraits and artists like Sherrie Levine, who rephotographed other people's images. What her grandmother did struck her as an authentic, unschooled sort of conceptualism. "It was so beautiful. It was about her looking at herself, thinking about photographs, and thinking about other people looking at her. It was mind-blowing. It made me get into art, actually."

"Me Edith" became the title of Stark's first exhibition, as an undergraduate at San Francisco State University. (She earned her MFA at Art Center College of Design.) She recounted the origin story in late October, on opening day of her most extensive U.S. show, "Frances Stark: This could become a gimmick [sic] or an honest articulation of the workings of the mind," a 20-year survey of collages, drawings, videos and sculptures at MIT's List Visual Arts Center (through Jan. 2).

Stark is compact and intense, relentlessly cerebral but quick to laugh. Depleted from the effort of installing the show (with curator Joao Ribas), she nevertheless grew animated walking through it, remarking on the "insanely consistent formal language" she hadn't noticed as the work unfolded over time. What captivated her in that early encounter with her grandmother's self-labeled photograph remains evident throughout the exhibition, in her fascination with the acts of looking and creating, self-reflexivity and autobiography, in the way she integrates the visual and verbal, and teases out connections between her physical body and body of work.

Stark has exhibited extensively in Europe and shows in Los Angeles at Marc Foxx. She was the subject of a solo show at the Hammer Museum in 2002 and will be included in the museum's upcoming invitational, "All of this and nothing," opening Jan. 30. A professor at USC, she maintains a studio in Chinatown and lives in South Pasadena with her partner and 7-year-old son. She has published two books, one of collected writings (2003) and the other, "The Architect and the Housewife" (1999), composed of personal essays examining gender-inflected domestic and professional roles. A week after the MIT opening, Stark made her curatorial debut at the Hammer, with "Houseguest: Frances Stark Selects From the Grunwald Collection."

At the invitation of curator Allegra Pesenti, Stark perused the collection's 45,000 prints, drawings, photographs and books over six or seven months, ultimately shaping a sequence of 46 images to line the blackened walls of the museum's vault gallery. Motifs thread through the show like the melodic lines of a fugue, leading the eye from an 18th century Italian academic study of knee joint and calf muscles to the gleaming legs of a corpse in an etching by Goya, from the homely visages of bagpipe players in a 16th century German engraving to Otto Dix's lurid Weimar-era lithograph "Procuress." Formal rhythms and rhymes give the selection forward momentum; the images progress through evocations of camaraderie, loneliness, tender humor, physical effort, concealment and availability, the sexual, the social and the sublime.

"Frances set out without a certain theme in mind," said Pesenti. "She decided to start browsing, meandering at will, and found herself drawn to images of man and woman, and the more she worked, the more it became a panoply of humanity, from birth to death. There is an actual vocabulary between one image and the next, a flow of moods and sensory transitions. There's Frances' wittiness throughout and also an underlying sense of melancholia."

Stark's exhibition at the List touches on several approaches and themes she's adopted over the years. From her earliest work, she has responded to literary sources, Witold Gombrowicz's novel "Ferdynand," Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther," and others. She often incorporates a given text by tracing it, via carbon, onto rice paper, intellectual dialogue yielding a delicate, sensual object.

"I want to play around with the idea of what is text in art," she said, and to explore "the very intimate relationship between the reader and the writer." Printed matter factors into much of her work, collages that meld exhibition announcements, magazine pages, junk mail and more — the accretions of everyday life. One piece pictures a suspended flow of such material through the mail slot in a glass door. Another, part of the series, "I Went Through My Bin," features a black, silhouetted hand holding a bouquet of printed fragments and scraps.

Stark's work often centers on the experience of making art and, paradoxically, the blockages that obstruct the process of creation. In one collage, the generalized figure of the artist reads a sheet of paper bearing the words, "Why should you not be able to assemble yourself and write." The text comes from a letter she received from a friend.

"Doubt is almost like a strategy for me, or like a style," she said. "It's a huge motor in my process."

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