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Linda Yablonsky, "Frances Stark's Best Thing," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2011

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Artifacts | Frances Stark's Best Thing

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | OCTOBER 26, 2011, 3:21 PM



Nadya Wasylko, courtesy of the artist

The artist Frances Stark, at right, with Skerrit Bwoy, from "Put a Song in Your Thing," a work in progress to be performed at the Abrons Art Center on Nov. 4.

Some people like to talk during sex. Others get their kicks by talking about it. And then there are those who would rather just watch.

The Los Angeles artist Frances Stark has something for everyone in "My Best Thing," a compulsively watchable, feature-length digital animation now playing at MoMA P.S. 1 that goes well beyond the whisper of sweet nothings. Clad either in fig leaves or briefs, the wide-eyed, stock C.G.I. dolls on screen re-enact the flirtations that Stark, 44, carried on with two 20-something Italian men whom she met at different times last year while taking random strolls through a video

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sex chat site.

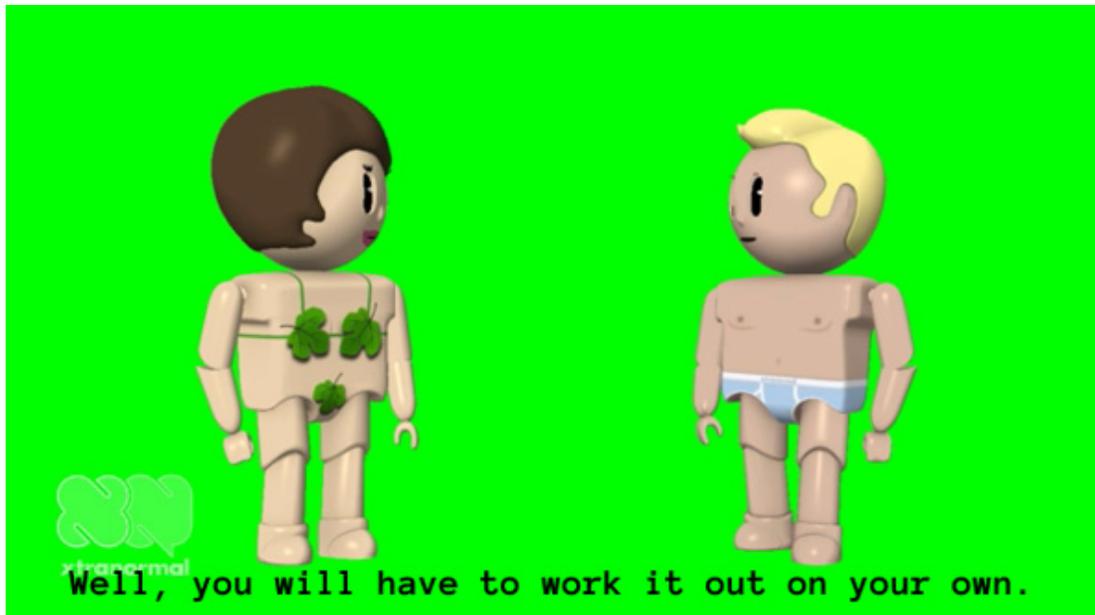
Though they often talk dirty, the characters' spoken and texted exchanges constantly digress into other channels of their very different lives, taking the film deep into the heart of intimate human relationships. Nietzsche, Fellini, Glenn Gould, Picasso, political protest and the suicides of writers like David Foster Wallace all become part of each pair's ardent, LOL-infused "post-coital" banter, as do their families, careers and Stark's responsibilities as both the mother of an 8-year-old boy and a professor at the University of Southern California.

"Show me more," says Marcello, her first suitor, once the two have repaired to the privacy of Skype. "Wow," he says, though in his accent it comes out as, "Whoa."

"I'm old," she replies. "So you have to be forgiving."

"Heh-heh," he says. "I like mature women."

And so it goes, as the minimal small talk and virtual fondling escalate over 10 episodes into a poignant, funny and revealing narrative of desire and self-doubt. Though the computer-generated voices lack emotion, the figures' flashing eyes, pregnant pauses and twisting dance movements convey a remarkable depth of feeling.



Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise

A scene from the Frances Stark video "My Best Thing."

Stark is a writer as well as a visual artist, and much of her work to date involves a struggle for words as well as meaning. "Why is it I always want to explain to you everything?" Stark asks Marcello, occasionally resorting to Google's translator to make sure she understands him, while he apologizes for his awkward English. But the two speak volumes through their bodies.

"I got fascinated by feeling so intensely for people I didn't know," Stark said in a Skype conversation the other day. "I was never into Internet sex, but because it's a form of seduction that took place through typing and interacting visually, I got hooked."

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So do many viewers of “My Best Thing” — to my mind, Stark’s best thing yet. In an early episode, she tells her young suitor that she is in “a heavy dancehall phase,” and shows him a music video of the high-speed, violently sexual Jamaican dance style called daggering. Her obsession with it led to “Put a Song in Your Thing,” a live show that Stark will stage next week in New York as a commission from the Performa 11 biennial of performance art.

Skerrit Bwoy, a “hype man” and D.J. for the dancehall band Major Lazer distinguished by his yellow mohawk, will join her onstage with a “BigBox” sound system rigged by the British artist Mark Leckey, who won the Turner Prize in 2008. Mostly, though, the show will take place on a screen, where Stark’s Skype chats will again appear, along with projections from her current show at the Mills College Art Museum. This time, the performers will read the texts aloud as lyrics for the dozen songs in the show, which Stark says brings it close to a silent movie experience. “It’s a way of throwing my voice,” she said. “I’m there, but not really.”

One tune is a piano piece composed by her second Italian discovery in “My Best Thing.” Stark made the video as her contribution to the current Venice Biennale, a decision played out in the course of the piece, when she asks Marcello, a filmmaker, to collaborate with her on the project. “I was willing to do whatever it took to get him here,” Stark said. “We had an interesting story, and I wanted to tell it but didn’t know how.”

At that point, she discovered Xtranormal.com, a Web site supplying animators with characters, voices and music, and went to work, despite Marcello’s subsequent disappearance after he was badly beaten in a Roman political protest. Her biggest problem then was what to tell her boyfriend, Stuart Bailey, who is one half of Dexter Sinister, a design and publishing collaborative. “I told him that Chat Roulette had become part of my thinking,” she said. “But I don’t think it’s his favorite thing in the world.”

Frances Stark’s “My Best Thing” is on view through January 2012 at MoMA P.S. 1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City. She will perform “Put a Song in Your Thing” on Nov. 4 at the Abrons Art Center, 466 Grand Street. “The Whole of All the Parts as Well as the Parts of All the Parts” continues through Dec. 11 at Mills College Art Museum, 5000 MacArthur Boulevard, Oakland, Calif.