

GLADSTONE GALLERY

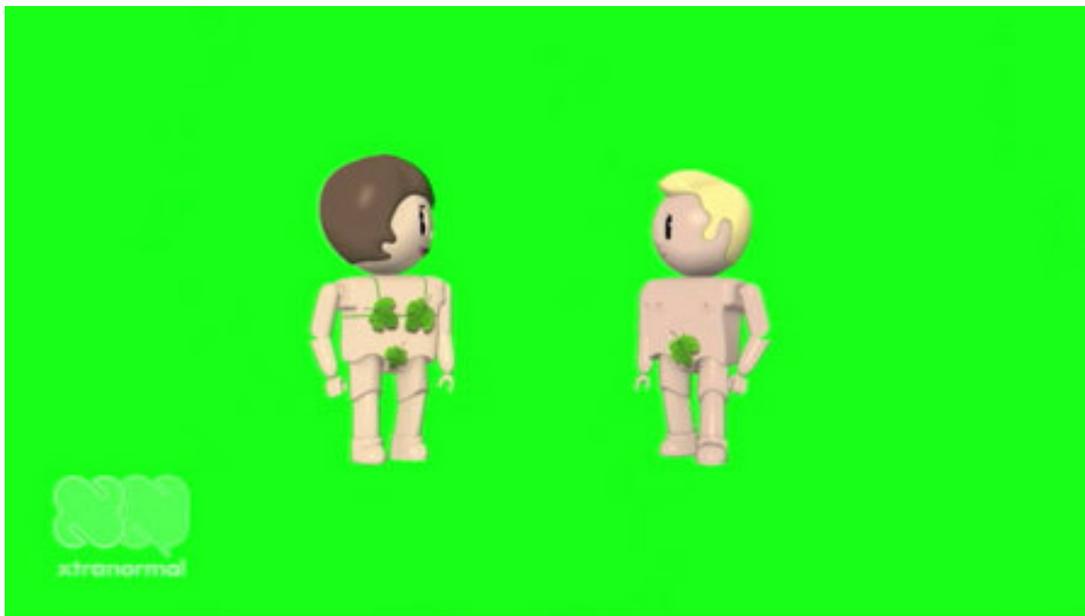
Rachel Rosenfield, "Frances Stark: Not Just Idle Chat," *Canadian Art*, April 15, 2012

CANADIANART

Review

Frances Stark: Not Just Idle Chat

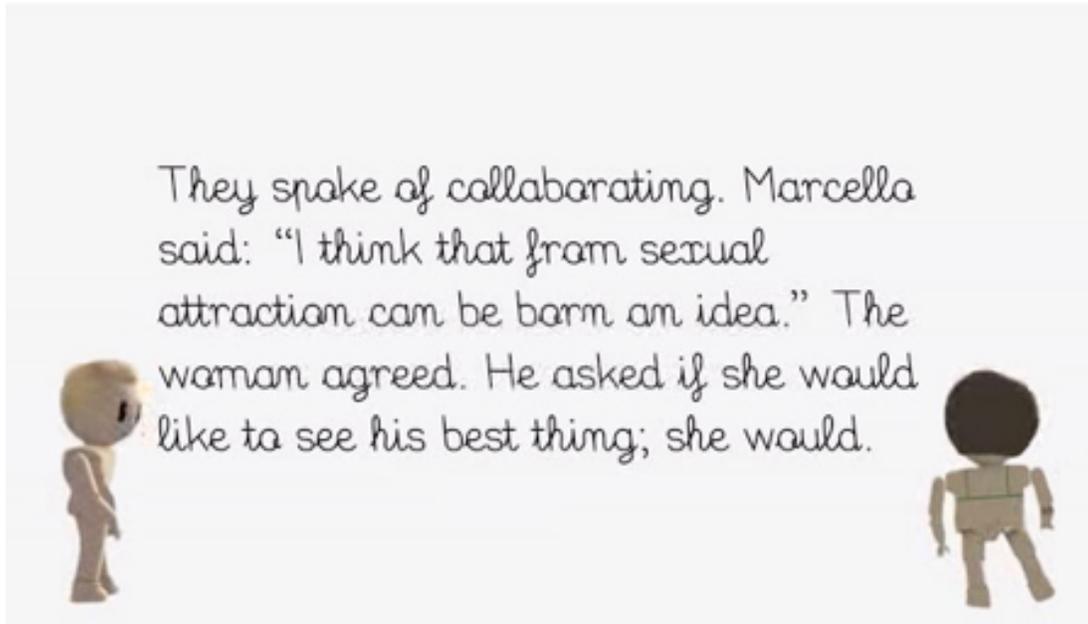
Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver Feb 3 to Apr 15 2012
by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo



Frances Stark *My Best Thing* 2011 Video still Courtesy the artist, Marc Foxx Los Angeles, Gavin Brown's Enterprise New York City, Greengrassi London and Galerie Buchholz Cologne

Frances Stark's feature-length animation *My Best Thing*, now showing at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery, premiered to critical acclaim at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Stark's episodic video is a narrative adapted from her online conversations with two strangers in sex chatrooms. The female and male characters in this erudite but raunchy soap opera are Playmobil-like avatars who wear nothing but fig leaves or underwear, engage in virtual sex, and have heady discussions about the meaning of life, sex, art, literature, film, philosophy, collaboration and political activism.

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Frances Stark *My Best Thing* 2011 Video still Courtesy the artist, Marc Foxx Los Angeles, Gavin Brown's Enterprise New York City, Greengrassi London and Galerie Buchholz Cologne

Stark uses Xtranormal.com's text-to-speech software to create the audio component of the dialogue, enabling the viewer to hear the conversation between an American art professor who is preparing a work for the Venice Biennale (i.e. Stark) and her Italian male partners. The artificiality of the synthesized speech, particularly that of the men speaking Italian-accented English, underscores the challenges not only of translating text into speech, but of translating from one language to another. (Marcello, the man in the first story, bemoans the inadequacies of Google Translate.) In chat, emotion is hard to convey, nuances are lost, and silences are impossible to interpret. Despite these difficulties, Stark's character avows that working "with a translator is almost like sex. It's the closest read you will ever get from anybody." And she continues to seek connections, and even collaborations, with her virtual partners.

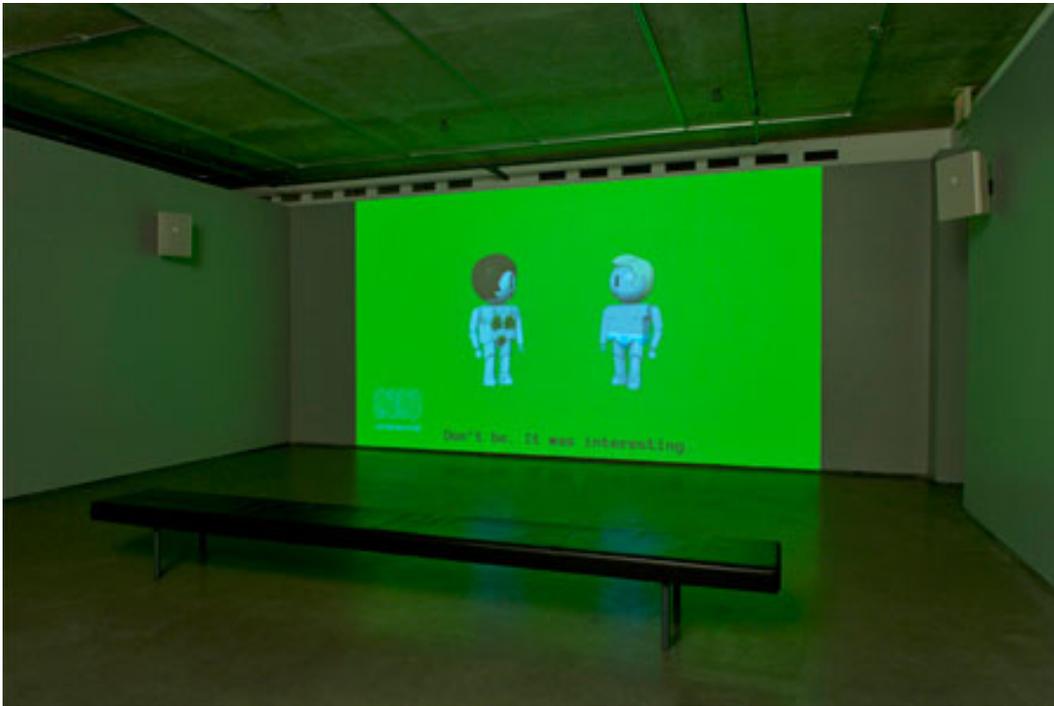


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The video is wickedly funny, titillating and revealing, not only because of the verbal intercourse, but also because of the absurd movements of the plastic figures as they bat their eyes, move their mouths, or dance along to dancehall music. Stark's choice to represent her characters as the kind of toys usually associated with child's play accentuates the naughtiness of their sexual banter and the unexpectedness of their sophisticated conversations about philosophers, writers, intellectual history and the difficulties of being an artist.

In this era of hyperconnectivity via the Internet and social media, it is easy to communicate on a superficial level, yet difficult to engage in a deeper way because of the inability to convincingly impart emotions and intentions via email and chat. Yet as Stark so effectively demonstrates, as we become more comfortable revealing our intimate thoughts and activities online (not to mention our private body parts), and when we can break up with our lovers via text or broadcast pictures of our bodies for the entire world to see, mediated communication has become our new reality.



Frances Stark *My Best Thing* 2011 Installation view Courtesy the artist, Marc Foxx Los Angeles, Gavin Brown's Enterprise New York City, Greengrassi London and Galerie Buchholz Cologne / photo Scott Massey