

GLADSTONE GALLERY

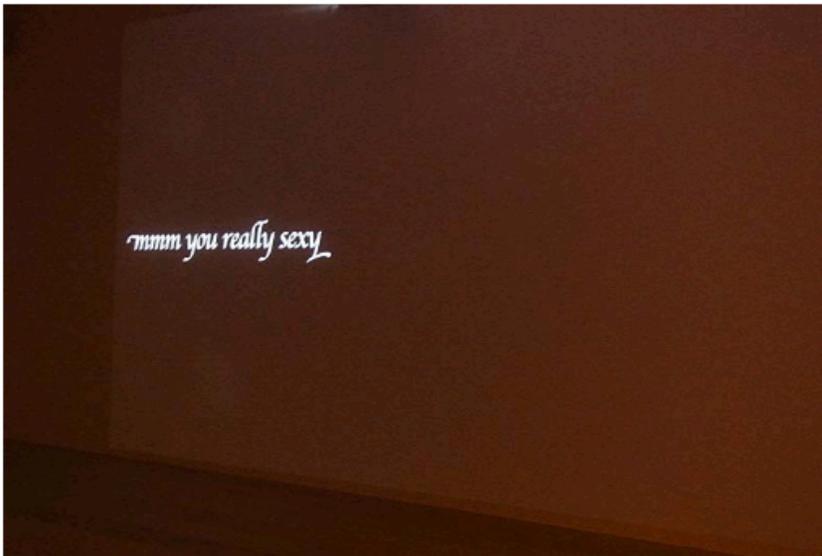
Mark Sheerin, "The Unbearable Lightness of Frances Stark," *Hyperallergic*, July 3, 2014

HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS

The Unbearable Lightness of Frances Stark

Mark Sheerin | July 3, 2014



Frances Stark, "Osservate, Leggete Con Me" (2012) (photograph by the author for Hyperallergic)

LONDON — In a 21st-century take on the artist and his model, Frances Stark has performed a gender swap and had her wicked way with up to ten male muses. But in her case, the critical distance came from the virtual environment in which they met. All these encounters were by way of the miracle of camsex. We have come a long, long way from the classical nude.

There are currently two pieces by Stark at the Hayward Gallery Project Space, London. While both relate sexual encounters, there is a lightness of touch quite at odds with the panting desperation one might expect from a session on Chat Roulette. The first piece you come to, "Osservate, leggete con me" (2012) combines Mozart with a script-like font, giving these trysts the feel of a Restoration Comedy.

GLADSTONE GALLERY



Still from Frances Stark, "My Best Thing" (2011) (screenshot via [Little Paper Planes/Vimeo](#))

The second piece was put together with the help of an online animation site. The artist and her models appear as clean-cut as toy figurines, modesty preserved by fig leaves or underpants. Remarkably, "My Best Thing," which is the title of the second installation, is a feature length film. There is plenty of time spent in discussion, and the conversations run as deep as desire.

Stark is based in Los Angeles, where I reached to her via Skype. The artist's preference was to conduct the following interview by keyboard rather than camera or audio.

* * *

Mark Sheerin: *I found your pieces funny, alarming and quite erotic ... Did it take a lot of courage to make and exhibit those two pieces at Hayward?*

Frances Stark: Thank you. Well I have showed them before the Hayward, in many places. Regarding courage, I guess I can be pretty 'ballsy' at times ;) But let me add that I've noticed that the reception of this work almost always foregrounds the fact that I've exposed myself, exposed my personal habits. And believe me, I have never ever felt unique for masturbating on the internet!

MS: *Both pieces had a storybook quality and an innocence which I found quite removed from the image of Chat Roulette. Were you aware of cleaning things up at all?*

FS: There is one bit with gratuitous mmmmmms and ahhhs and stuff, but yes I was very aware of cleaning things up. I am still always so conscious of what my son will think/thinks and how that will affect him. I also had a boyfriend at the time!

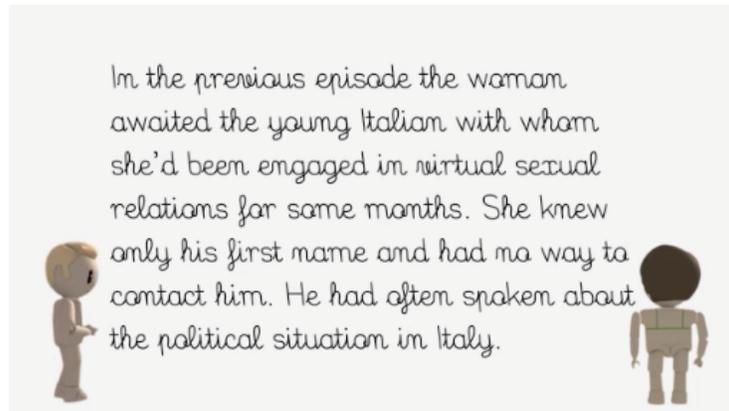
MS: *I wasn't going to ask about family reactions, but I guess those must have been a consideration.*

FS: Yes, I gave a talk about this stuff at a college with my mom and stepdad (WWII vet) in the audience...it was intense

MS: *Wow, that *is* brave. What did they say?*

GLADSTONE GALLERY

FS: I'm not sure I even want to go there. And what's so funny is I'm constantly telling people "I don't do THAT anymore," which is totally true. And so I live with this hypersexualized work now, in a moment when I really feel like you couldn't pay me to get naked in front of a webcam. The family gets it on many levels, but you know it is quite alienating and awkward, but everyone in my family knows I am 'deep' and that everything is usually in the service of art or philosophy so ... But for sure *brave* is a word I hear a lot ... it used to be *painstaking*. Hahaha, the bravery is so much more about allowing the conflation of the artist/horny middle-aged woman.



MS: *I was also wondering about the depth of the discussions you were able to have with your partners online. Was it luck or judgement that so many of them were, perhaps, also thinkers?*

FS: I think it was a combo of luck and judgment, because as I say I picked them for their body parts most of the time! And it was never intended to be made into art (with the exception of the second character in My Best Thing, who's already witness to me struggling with making it into art). People who can respond to my sense of humor or whatever, become confidants before and/or after the sex. So that's the part that was so amazing to me was that: what were the odds of finding these men with these remarkable stories that were so relevant to my thinking? It's like because I was OPEN to these being meaningful exchanges on top of their basic use value (getting off) then all the word play and coincidences and stuff just flowed constantly.

MS: *As both an artist and someone who has investigated this stuff, just how close can two people get if they only meet via a webcam?*

FS: Ummm, I don't know. One of the things that made the intimacy possible was the fact that there was no interest or expectation in gauging the 'realness' of knowing each other. You know, there was no real need to ever think about what might happen in real life, or whatever. So that was a contract that shaped the possibility for the closeness or openness. Because of the equality of the contract. One has a kind of respect for the other that is very fundamental, very Jesus-y

MS: *Did it lead you to religion!!!?*

FS: Hahahha, it led me to my next project Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater...I came of age in the 80s – Reagan, cold war, nuclear threat etc. – and grew up in the 70s – sex, drugs and rock and roll – and loved the transcendentalists in high school so the notion that sex is a fundamental, positive force that sees beyond nation states.... blah blah blah.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

MS: *Can you tell me a bit about your use of music because I found it really set up the anticipation of what was to come, in both pieces...?*

FS: The incorporation of the dancehall beat [in My Best Thing] was partly because of my interest in the ultra-explicit, hypersexualized genre and how certain ‘riddims’ are used over and over by different artists and also based on the by now very common experience of consuming television series on laptops...you know when you’re into your 6th episode of the Wire at 4am and you still don’t fast forward through the theme music... the lovely sensation of being hooked on seriality. As for the use of music in Osservate... that’s a very different approach. The song is from an aria from Mozart’s Don Giovanni, the catalogue aria, in which Don Giovanni’s sexual exploits are enumerated in a somewhat comical fashion.



MS: *I see, that was very deftly done because at almost every point the music seemed to underpin the text*

FS: Yes, that was so much fun, to see how many moods and things could happen from those overlaps...when it has the little sad violin or when it gets spirited...

MS: *I was wondering about the connection between the two guys in My Best Thing, both Italian. What was that about?*

FS: Italians are very good at communicating in this realm, whereas Americans are reprehensible. Americans are disgusting and awful and boring there were only a couple Americans I had any dialogue with. They are truly just a lost people

MS: *What about the English?*

FS: Omg, one English guy (they were almost all way under 30) made a joke and I was like OMFG that’s hilarious and then it turns out he had just stolen a Will Ferrell line and that night I actually saw Will Ferrell at a party put on by the Hammer Museum and I told him the story!

MS: Hahaha, that’s brilliant.

FS: I swear my entire life became full of the most insane coincidences.

FS: To go back to your religion question/comment... in a new work of mine I say “I’m a holy whore, players, hear me out...”

MS: That’s not a Will Ferrell line!

GLADSTONE GALLERY

FS: Hahahhaa. The rest of it goes “that gun in my mouth, I’m taking it out, dicks will come in, truth will come out”

MS: That’s good. What’s the piece called?

FS: Bobby Jesus’s Alma Mater B/W Reading the Book of David And/Or Paying Attention is Free
(Mouthfull! no pun intended)

MS: Thank you, Frances. Will look out for it.

Frances Stark, Look, read along with me... *continues at the Hayward Gallery (Southbank Centre, Belvedere Rd, London) through July 13.*