

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Frances Stark and the Art of Narcissism

By NEGAR AZIMI AUG. 18, 2015

Junk mail, job concerns, a lover's penis and a young male muse called Bobby Jesus — the artist's material is her life.



Frances Stark, who has a Warholian penchant for collecting characters, especially men, with her muse Bobby Jesus (in braids) and his friend Aiookhai El-Bey, a.k.a. "Dubb," in her studio in L.A.'s Chinatown. Andy Freeberg

The artist [Frances Stark](#) has been known to insist that she is a writer. It's true that she is the author of many essays, which have been anthologized twice and are marked by a witty, stream-of-consciousness style full of surprising digressions, connections and confessions. It is not uncommon, for instance, for her to reveal that she has taken a pause of a few months in between sentences. But her insistence on being a writer is perhaps also related to the fact that her artwork is marked by a dense, literary quality; she tends to gravitate toward idiosyncratic, unexpected forms of self-expression, from annotations of poetry to conversations in chat rooms to rap, which she refers to as an emancipatory form of autobiography.

To art audiences, Stark is perhaps best known for the work she made for the Venice Biennale in 2011, borne of her experience in the virtual rooms of Chatroulette, an online social portal introduced to her by her students at the University of Southern California, which she used over a period of months to have conversations and virtual sex with men of diverse ages and shapes from around the world. The resulting feature-length video, "My Best Thing" (the title is a reference to one of her lovers' pet names for his penis), turned the transcripts of Stark's exchanges with two of the men into conversations spoken by hokey avatars resembling semi-nude Playmobil characters. The topic shifted from hammy erotica to lofty ruminations on creativity to discussions about the Arab Spring, which was unfolding at the time. One of the Biennale's most talked-about works, the film attracted a steady stream of visitors, myself included, who lingered in its darkened room for suspiciously long spells, captivated by its alluring combination of charm, intellectual rigor and sexual charge.

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“My Best Thing” earned Stark a reputation as an artist with little regard for personal boundaries (or, as the art critic Jerry Saltz put it, as an artist who made high art from a “masturbatory tryst with a younger man”). Her popular Instagram feed ([@therealstarkiller](#)), which often feels a lot like her art, offers another window into her personal life; on an average day, it might include an image of text messages on her phone (“Everyday I’m hustling,” she writes to her son, Arlo, 12. “LOL,” he responds); a doctored image of the front cover of Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Being and Nothingness” featuring the rapper Sean Paul; and a picture at an L.A. party of herself, Arlo and Bobby Jesus, a young Chicano with long dark plaits whom Stark calls her muse (“Impossible Demographic #thrasher”).

Youthful at 48, Stark hides behind long choppy bangs and has a shy, tomboyish affect only occasionally undercut by astonishing erudition. Many of her artworks rely on complicated backstories involving chance meetings that often take on mythical qualities — how, for instance, in 2010, on a flight from New York to L.A., she met Skerrit Bwoy, then a leading practitioner of “daggering,” a frenetic Jamaican dance style that incorporates wrestling and dry humping, and later staged a performance with him for Performa 11, in which he daggered her, to the shock and confusion of the assembled.



“Total Performance,” 1990, 35mm slide

Another such origin story takes place one sunny day in an L.A. skate park in 2012, when Stark spotted a handsome man who was reading a book called “The Art of Seduction.” She struck up a conversation with him about the book, which she recalls made her think of the 18th-century writer and adventurer Giacomo Casanova, whose memoirs she was reading at the time. The two became friends of a sort; when the man, Brandon Martin, texted her weeks later to say that he’d just spent five days in jail on false charges, she, more than a little curious, picked him up at a Metro station and drove him to a friend’s house. At some point during their encounter, Stark had the idea to include Martin in an audio project for which she had been commissioned by the Frieze Art Fair. When they finally met to work on the piece, he suggested his friend Bobby could handle the recording.

The resulting artwork, based on Stark’s encounter with the two young men, was titled “Trapped in the VIP and/or In Mr. Martin’s Inoperable Cadillac.” Stark has an unusual speaking voice, a semi-stoned drawl that is both laconic and vulnerable-sounding, and an ability to listen to people very intently. The threesome’s meandering conversation about race and life in what Bobby referred to as “planet hood” touched on Martin’s impounded car, chronic run-ins with the police and the culture of lynching in the American South — and was installed, with the pitch-perfect sense of social critique that Stark’s admirers have come to expect, in the sound systems of the Frieze BMWs that ferried V.I.P.s to and from the art fair.

Stark, in other words, is an artist who is not afraid of being difficult. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that she exists in that rare Bermuda Triangle of being simultaneously feted by fellow artists and critics (it is not uncommon to hear that she is someone’s “favorite” artist) while remaining relatively unknown to a larger public. Although she is represented by four major international galleries and has two midcareer retrospectives at major American museums this year alone, her work does not bring in the astronomical sums associated with many of her contemporaries, or even, as she wryly observes, some of her former students at U.S.C. At a time when artists are encouraged to produce large, digestible objects for collectors’ homes, Stark persists in producing works — at a slow pace, no less — of extraordinary nuance and complexity. “She’s not exactly making easy-to-sell paintings,” agreed Ali Subotnick, who is curating Stark’s upcoming retrospective at the [Hammer Museum](#) at U.C.L.A. “People like artists to produce the same thing over and over, and Frances is constantly changing.”

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It is hard to think of any artists who do not somehow mine their personal lives for material, but for Stark, art feeds back into life until it, too, is remade. In the three years since they met, she and Bobby Jesus have become almost inseparable. (“Bobby” is his real name; Stark came up with “Jesus.”) She takes him to exhibitions and parties and has made several works drawn from his life story. After spending time in her orbit, he has ambitions to be a gallerist, and Stark is currently helping him secure a space in an old furniture factory in South Los Angeles. She describes him with an impressive range of terms including friend, confidant, sometime studio help and muse. (“I’m a single mother and Bobby is a brother to my son and we all live together,” she recently wrote to me when I inquired about the nature of their relationship. “Yes Bobby is handsome and sexy and 20 years younger than me and the reader can project on us whatever they want.”) Bobby Jesus, for his part, calls his relationship to Stark a kind of “education,” and his newfound environment “The House of Frances,” like a fashion line.

Of course, there are many women who have made art from their most intimate relationships or sexual exploits. One might think of the artist-writers Sophie Calle, who has revisited letters from jilted and jilting lovers, and Chris Kraus, who diarized her obsessions to thrilling effect in the autobiographical novel “I Love Dick.” But Stark herself admits that her own stance toward Bobby Jesus and the other men she has been inspired by can seem strikingly mannish (“or whatever the female term for womanizer is,” she jokes). Stark’s universe is populated with characters — her lovers, her students, the young disadvantaged men she invites to her studio (a couple of whom have robbed her), her son — whom she supports or “feeds,” and who eventually become her raw material. It is hard not to think of Andy Warhol, who also cultivated a vivid cast of players to star in his dramas, both in real life and in art — treating his Factory as a kind of living social experiment. “People have suggested that it’s exploitative,” Stark confided to me one day about Bobby Jesus. “But he’s aware of what he’s doing. And he wants to be a star.”

Stark has long been interested in the vexed questions of wealth and class, especially as they manifest in the art world where, she says, quoting a friend, everyone works “one-percent adjacent.” She grew up with working-class parents (her father was an electrical engineer; her mother worked for a phone company, plugging in the wire connections “like Lily Tomlin”). As a teenager, Stark describes herself as a “kind of punk rocker”; she was voted “most spirited” in junior high and, at 14 or 15, tattooed a peace symbol on her ankle with a sewing needle, as a way “to wrap my head around the dawn of the Reagan area.” At 21, she set a motorcycle land-speed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, her second time on a street bike. She points out that this was well before Rachel Kushner’s novel “The Flamethrowers.”

Her greatest influence might have been the late artist Mike Kelley, with whom Stark studied at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and who better than any other artist captured the dark, angsty spirit of American suburban youth, which included album covers, processions, videos and creepy sculptural assemblages of toys. “He seemed like a rock star basically,” she said in a presentation she made in honor of Kelley in 2014, “but like, insanely intelligent, and also the work had to do with class issues that kind of came up for me.” After graduating, she held various odd jobs, including working at Macy’s in Atlanta in the men’s section selling Tommy Hilfiger and Polo Ralph Lauren (“five out of 10 transactions were theft-related”); chauffeuring the artist Sigmar Polke around Los Angeles; and, with fellow artists Sharon Lockhart and Marnie Weber, painting the walls of Mel Gibson’s Malibu mansion to look faux-old.

There are moments when Stark and her work can seem a welcome antidote to an over-commercialized, gimmick-strewn art world — to represent, as Janet Malcolm once wrote of the avant-garde, “the conscience of the culture, not its id.” But when we met earlier this year at her home, one-half of a classic midcentury modern-style house in South Pasadena stuffed with books and art and comfy chairs, I found her suffering what appeared to be a low-grade nervous breakdown. She had been sick for two weeks and was despairing over at least half a dozen things, including her own ambivalence about her upcoming retrospectives (“What does it mean to be retrospective?”) and her place in contemporary culture. “I’m almost 50 years old and still having to do cartwheels and jumping jacks to get people’s attention,” she said. “I’m exhausted and psychologically falling to pieces. I’m broke, too. Why am I broke?”

It is hard work, being a hero. Such concerns will be familiar to Stark’s admirers; her art bristles with anxieties and self-doubt. Her early works were mostly quiet, ephemeral gestures that spoke to their own fragility. In the early ’90s, for example, she painstakingly copied out the annotations she had found inscribed next to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in a secondhand copy of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land and Other Poems”; separated from the poem itself, the delicate hieroglyphics on drawing paper had a melancholic, ghostly air. She has made collages from her own junk mail, gently raising questions about what constitutes “value” or “waste;” and often equivocates over just how much to expose or disclose (2008’s “The New Vision” was a crudely drawn self-portrait of the artist pulling up her skirt to expose a pair of leggings). “She’s probably the most narcissistic artist I’ve ever worked with,” Subotnick admitted, “but also aware of how that narcissism is integral to her work. She’s not afraid to put anything out there.”

Last December, after disagreements with U.S.C.’s administration, and following a \$70 million donation to the university by the rapper Dr. Dre and his associate Jimmy Iovine to create a new Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation, Stark quit her job as a tenured professor at the Roski School of Art and Design. By the time I visited her, the drama involving the university and two of the world’s most iconic music moguls had taken on the noirish undertones of Polanski’s “Chinatown.” Naturally, Stark had already incorporated the ordeal into her work, in the form of a video piece made for the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, to which she had given the appealingly cumbersome title, “Bobby Jesus’s Alma Mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention Is Free.” When I asked her about the piece, she admitted that many critics hadn’t grasped the thickly referential and morally serious work’s meaning at all. “I wasn’t that crazy woman who had sex on the Internet anymore,” she explained.

Still, she shows no sign of compromising. A few months later, I saw her again in Venice during the Biennale. She looked resplendent in a canary yellow dress and happier than I had ever seen her. Her solo show at the Art Institute of Chicago had been well-received and, most satisfying, all of her U.S.C. students had followed her lead and dropped out; the plight had even made the news. She was planning her next work, she added: a “pedagogical opera” set to rap, and based on “The Magic Flute.”