

Terry Meyer, "Frances Stark: Intimism," *ArtReview*, September, 2015

ArtReview

Frances Stark *Intimism*

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She snatched a charming painting, relatively small yet all the more captivating because of its compactness, and I won't look at it in the same way again. Frances Stark's borrowing of Félix Vallotton's *Madame Vallotton and Her Niece, Germaine Aghion* (1899) from the European painting and sculpture galleries at The Art Institute is an act of nuanced devotion and productive refusal that magnifies the impact of this survey of her work. As one of the strongest artists of her generation, one who is more than willing to speak truth to power with humour and poetry, Stark's repositioning of a classic representative of late-nineteenth-century Intimism couldn't be more direct: is the child at Madame's feet still ripping that paper to shreds or is she now calmly contemplating the fruits of her labour? The great thing about the painting, a point reinforced time and time again in Stark's output, is that it can be both at the same time.

A direct, even formal connection is made in this show between the painting and *this is not exactly a cat video: w/David Bowie's "Starman"* (2006), in which Stark's young son and friend react to a video of Bowie playing on the screen of a MacBook as she films. The thing that these two works have in common – a masterful presentation of the interplay between focus and distraction in both form and content – renders what makes them different pretty much irrelevant, especially the century or so between their dates. Overall this survey demonstrates Stark's singular ability to provoke this type of assessment: her ability to work across media and get to real (as in life) connections over and over can be breathtaking. No focus without distraction, no disruption without contemplation.

Nowhere is this more the case than in her multimedia installation *Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention*

Is Free (2013). As someone appalled by the travesty of the dismantling of the MFA program from which Stark resigned as a tenured professor, I'm well aware that this work about two 'usc's' (University of Southern California and University of South Central) is preaching to my choir; nonetheless it remains one of the most immersive and oppositional art works of its time. (It is available for viewing on Stark's website, but loses too much of its impact there.) One of the best things about this show is that many pre-college students are seeing it because the museum is a prime destination for school groups, even if, as I witnessed, the adult chaperones quickly whisk their charges out of the room containing this work with its booming rap music and all-too-honest script. But it was satisfying to watch other kids taking in Stark's newest videos, for example *Poets on the Pyre* (2015), on monitors with headphones, right under their minders' noses. Know hope. Terry R. Myers



Bobby Jesus's Alma Mater b/w Reading the Book of David and/or Paying Attention Is Free, 2013.
Photo: Mark Woods. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York