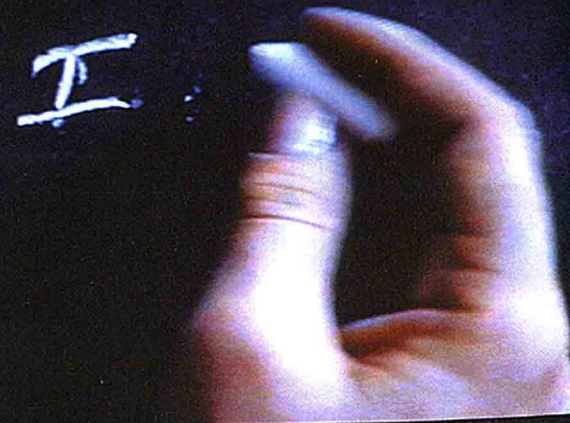


'Pagan' Stories:  
The Situations of Narrative in Recent Art  
curated by Janet Kraynak



Bonnie Collura

Aki Fujiyoshi

Anna Gaskell

Johnna MacArthur

Alix Pearlstein

Georgina Starr

Sergio Vega

Kara Walker

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APEX

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cover:  
Johnna MacArthur *Chalk Confessions* 1996 Video 16 min. 47 sec.

Special thanks to the artists and to Stefano Basilico, Paul Bloodgood, Marjory Jacobson, Michael Jenkins, Casey Kaplan, Rachel & Jean-Pierre Lehmann, Magdalena Sawon and Brent Sikkema.

And what can we possibly think of the artist, armed with a copy of Lewis Carroll's epic, trotting into the woods with her camera to picture an eccentric portrait of the adventures of Alice? And what of the artist who looks not to the imaginative fantasies of Carroll, but to the authorless myth of femininity-as-reproduction realized in the parable of Persephone? The seeming compulsion to eschew a prohibition on referentiality recasts the artist as *raconteur*, leaving the critic to stare blankly in the face of literary allusion and constructed fictions, questioning whether we are witnessing a revitalized commitment to *ut pictura poesis*, where art is the visual handmaiden to a pre-existing text, and criticism is imprisoned by iconography.



Anna Gaskell *Untitled #29* 1997 C-print  
8" x 10" 1 edition/5

Such an explanation, however, would require an enormous retreat from the responsibility to history. The hundreds of years since the Renaissance doctrine prevailed notwithstanding, it demands that the critic turn a deaf ear to the most recent past, where the very principles and properties of traditional narrative were deeply implicated. Within visual art's critique of illusionism, we can think of the 'specific objects' of Minimalism, the temporalization of performance, the analytical exercises of conceptualism, and the implosion of post-structuralist thinking in the last decade: in short, all of current art's predecessors that battled against the belief that meaning is wholly saturated by a referent, or secured through a transparent relationship to the author. Art, of course, had taken its cues from literature, philosophy and history, whose systematic dismantling of modernism's 'grand ideas' (history as



Bonnie Collura *Untitled (Guardian Blue)* 1997 Foam, plaster gauze, water putty, paper, wood, glue and paint 34" x 90" x 63"

the progress of spirit, the emancipation of the subject, etc.) constituted, in the words of Lyotard, a "crisis of narrative." Such was the tautology of modernism, he explained; appealing to meta-discourses in order to legitimize its own ideas, modernism denied their very status as *narratives* by naturalizing its codes. What was demanded was a manifold process: an examination of narrative's operations and cultural functions, and a displacement of epical accounts by the dissenting voice of 'little narratives'.

In face of current artistic practice, it becomes criticism's imperative to negotiate the historical within the contemporary, to redefine the reintroduction of illusionistic devices, folklore and other narrative tropes, through an analysis of the *situations* of narrative.

So we return to Gaskell's photographs, where the figure of Alice is multiplied as so many Alices, sporting identical dresses and pictured as limbs, arms, torsos, a face, and crops of blond hair. Within the space of a single picture is not so much the original and its copies, but an original that is continually deferred, reinforced by the photographic manipulations of framing, cropping, fragmenting and lighting. The *Wonder Series* does not operate as pure description, but presents the fictional Alice—who grows and shrinks and is never fixed as present—as a process of infinite becoming.<sup>1</sup> It is this instability of identity, marked as a site of projection and fantasy, which intrigued Collura as she mined the chronicles of Persephone: from her abduction into the mythical underworld to the censoring pen of Walt Disney's drawing pad, which made her



into the enduring icon of feminine purity. Refusing to yield to the demands of image-production which would secure its illustrative function, Collura's sculptural arrangement temporalizes the referent into a mutability of form and color. Negotiating its discontinuous fragments—a torso, a tree, corn husks, and a billowy mushroom that doubles as the folds of the skirt—the viewer is thrust into the shifting space of parallax.

The movement of displacement, Lyotard emphasizes, constitutes the work of little narratives. He introduces another story to explain this dynamic and give it a proper name—*paganism*. He tells us that he was thinking of the "lesser Greeks," the Sophists, who were derided by the Aristotelians for foregoing an allegiance to truth in favor of the play of rhetoric. Yet, Lyotard argues, "[T]hey have always indicated that we are dealing with what they call *phantasmata*, that is representations, and that it is not true that a rational knowledge of social and political facts is possible, at least insofar as they imply judgments and decisions."<sup>2</sup> *Paganism* reframes the goal of knowledge, revealing the violence of consensus which quiets dissent by banishing those who refuse to participate within predetermined rules. His analogy is the realm of language-games, where in every instance the terms must be redefined, "a society of gods that is forced to redraw its code," he writes.<sup>3</sup>

With a visual economy of means, Walker's deceptively simple forms materialize this process. Carefully cut from matte paper, they hybridize conflict—references to slave tales are overlaid with those of Romance fictions and nostalgic images of the



Kara Walker *Seesaw* 1995 Paper and tempera on canvas 10" x 10"

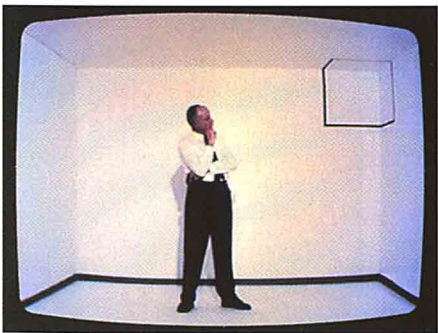


Sergio Vega *Back to Back Yarden Express* 1997 16 color photographs mounted on aluminum 64" x 80" (detail)

Old South—all given visual equivalence in the formal language of 18th-century silhouette portraits fancied by the aristocracy. The images don't tell the whole story, in that they gain meaning only through the reception of their visual cues—such that the subject of *L'il White Drop, Seesaw, Whip* becomes the transaction between narrator, story and receiver. It is such a process that might allow us to understand Vega's obsession with Paradise. The biblical story of origins becomes an entire lexicon which reveals the shaping of Western identity, and the perpetuation of its arrogance. The quest to rediscover a lost Eden will permit the inheritors of Genesis to locate other cultures outside of history and time. The images and texts in Vega's work—drawing on Christian iconography, a 17th-century book by Antonio de León Pinelo, and an invented tale—are superimposed into a series of cinematic frames, where 'paradise' reveals itself as a heterological operation, the historical arbiter of cultural othering.

For both Vega and Walker, to shift narrative's relation to time from the fixed repository of memory, to a retention of the past in the present, becomes crucial in the creation of

Alix Pearlstein *Still* 1997 Video 8 min. 30 sec.



dissensus. Pearlstein's *Still* thematizes this temporality of repetition, or more precisely, recitation, as a blank white interior becomes the constant backdrop for a shifting series of scenes: a man stares at the corner; a couple enters and has a dispute; a woman lies upon the floor. Recalling Richard Serra's verb list which redefined 'sculpture' as a series of operations ("to roll, to crease, to fold..." and so on), *Still* places each vignette not in the descriptive but in the transitive plane—*pose, embrace, concentrate, play...*—creating stories which cannot be constituted outside the enunciative act. This process of interpolation undergirds the isolated phrases that the hand scratches on the blackboard in MacArthur's video. A constant metronomic beat, audible in the background, structures the actions of the hand: writing its "confession," covering it with a monochromatic surface of white chalk, wiping the slate clean, wetting it with a wash of water, and then repeating the entire procedure. Initiating each phrase with the word "I," MacArthur's video materializes the linguistic shifter, as the "I's" reference constantly fluctuates between the pole of narrator and that of the addressee or reader: a single gesture which encapsulates the complexity of narrativity.



Georgina Starr *The Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum* 1994 Mixed media (detail)

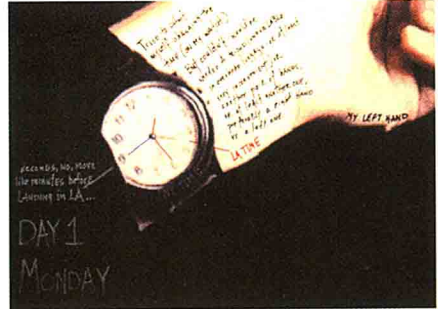
What I have provisionally called 'pagan' stories claim no universality, provoking the cynic to accuse them of being a hermetic retreat from public discourse into the realm of private meaning. So I will end our story with what might be called the 'first' story. It is the ostensible subject of Starr's and Fujiyoshi's "self-portraits." The story is well-known; Starr, the nomadic artist installed at the Hague to create art, fashioned the alter-ego "Junior" from stockings and stuffing, and then proceeded to collect objects and pictures that marked the

mundane events of each passing day. The results of her labor, crammed into the limited space of her room, were called *The Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum*, an epigrammatic aside to the operations of museology and collecting. This depletion of the self enacted in the portrait as a narrative of place and time similarly has driven Fujiyoshi's extended project, *Self-Portrait as Still Life*, executed over several years. In the *L.A. From N.Y.* series, everyday objects and collaged imagery culled from Hollywood films, serve as indexes of the artist counting down the five days preceding, and five days during a trip to Los Angeles where she participated in an exhibition. The photographs operate without securing a transparent relationship to the 'subject' (Fujiyoshi) but, as in Starr's *Nine Collections*, by generating meaning through the exposition of their procedures of making. Negotiating autobiography within the performative plane, the words of another critic can be heard, "the ultimate form of narrative transcends its contents," he wrote. Our story will conclude with his proposition.

"... it may be significant that it is at the same moment (around the age of three) that the little human 'invents' at once sentence, narrative, and the Oedipus."<sup>4</sup>

Janet Kraynak

<sup>1</sup>See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, translated by Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).  
<sup>2</sup>Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, translated by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 75.  
<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 17.  
<sup>4</sup>Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), p. 124.



Aki Fujiyoshi *L.A. From N.Y.* A series from the project *Self-Portrait as Still-Life* 1996 Drawing on C-print 20" x 24"