



Reflections of Ourselves

by Madge of Honor

As viewers approach Defibrillator's front window, there's a common refrain: "Has she started yet?" Marilyn Arsem is lying on her side facing a chair positioned in the back right corner of the space, which looks for now more like a still life than a performance. We peer in to watch her; we see ourselves reflected in the glass panes.

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Marilyn turns to lie on her back slowly. She sits up slowly. She slowly stands and considers the chair. She must have known for some time (hours? days? months?) that she would sit in this chair – but now the moment has come to do it. She moves so slowly that I become aware of the long span of the decision to sit here – a simple action that also contains all the actions leading up to it.

At first she still faces away from us; I don't feel invited into the action, rather that I am watching something private unfold. She drinks some water; she blows her

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stranger's body for so long and without shame. Even while she doesn't address the crowd at the window; even while durational performance art may not be the most accessible or engaging medium – what's happening before us is very human, even if it's more patient and bare than most of us allow ourselves to be.

Marilyn takes her time to face every direction in the chair. Passers by ask, "What is going on?" On the surface: very little. I try to figure out if I'm waiting for something to happen, or if I'm watching something happening now? I'm aware of a building resentment; I don't know what to do with the time Marilyn is giving us. She is moving along a continuum; I'm aimless. I'm thinking about what else I could be doing or what else I should be doing; I think about what I could have or should have done already. I think about what I haven't done. I struggle with the present.

So when Marilyn finally turns toward the table in the front of the space, it is significant. Like longing or like grieving. She clasps her hands in front of her face, acknowledges the time between her and the table. She can't see the pile of purple-blue flowers in the chair on the opposite side of the table, but she knows they're there. A crew spent the afternoon rigging the

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tension just right, and now she is sitting in that tension.

Viewers are immediately aware of the conceit – the entire arc of the performance becomes apparent. Yet we are glad to watch the image evolve; each iteration of the composition more beautiful than the next. Each moment drips slowly into the next one, becoming denser, sweeter—time is not passing, it's gathering. The performance expands, takes more time; saturates.

Marilyn's pace quickens as she approaches the table. She has only moved a few meters but it feels like we've been transported back and forth across a history. The single light bulb casts a warm, solemn glow. The flowers float off the chair; they swing slightly and hang in the air like a goodbye.

photo by Giana Gambino

Madge of Honor is a performance artist based in Boston. Madge often uses femininity, sexuality, spectacle, and endurance to expose and confront social conventions, constructions, and our collective fantasies/pathologies. Madge has performed in a wide range of settings across the US and UK.

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