

DON ED HARDY *Quiet rebel* HISTORY OF AMERICAN GRAFFITI *Morgan Sperlock speaks to the authors*

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ART+CULTURE







# MARNIE WEBER

INTERVIEW BY KRISTIN FARR / PORTRAIT BY LEEANN NICKEL

THE SPIRIT GIRLS STARE INTO YOUR SOUL AS IF THEY KNOW YOUR MOST GNAWING FEARS, AND THEY'VE ALREADY SEEN YOUR FATE. THEY ARE GHOSTS CHANNELLED BY ARTIST MARNIE WEBER THROUGH FILM, MUSIC, AND COLLAGE, AND THEIR RECENT FAREWELL PERFORMANCE TOOK PLACE AT A CEMETERY; THE GIRLS ROCKED THE CRYPTS WHILE CREEPING MONSTERS ROAMED THE GRAVEYARD.

#### BACKGROUND

- 1 Marnie was one of two women in the 80s LA Punk Band, the Party Boys.
- 2 She believes in ghosts wholeheartedly.
- 3 She is on the cover of Sonic Youth's *A Thousand Leaves* album.

When Marnie Weber stirs the cauldron, you cannot escape the darkness. The Spirit Girls left the stage to make room for a new band so I called Marnie to ask about her past projects and current investigations: farm life, religion, and the nightmares lurking in America's subconscious. —Kristin Farr

*Kristin Farr:* Tell me about your *Eternity* Forever exhibition.

*Marnie Weber:* There was a live screening of my black-and-white monster film, *The Eternal Heart*, and a big performance at a mausoleum. My monsters walked around the graveyard, and I had historical guides acting as grave diggers looking for their plot. In the mausoleum's art gallery, there were collages of my characters in graveyards,

which I'd been photographing over the years as a hobby. It was a huge, elaborate show.

I worked with a public art organization that likes to have exhibits in unusual places. I wanted my collages in this mausoleum gallery because it sat empty and nobody showed there. It was built in the 20s, a stunning European Cathedral style. The owners were open to the idea, and agreed that we could have a live score for the film. I was worried that their idea of a live screening was a violinist and a cello player. We ended up putting in a stage and all this sound equipment, electric guitars and drums, so it was basically a huge rock concert in this mausoleum. Five hundred people were there. The owners were really happy about the whole thing and let us have the place for free. It was

just amazing, a good lesson in asking for what you want. You never know what's going to happen.

And that was the Spirit Girls last performance?

All of my work had been about them for five years, and I thought it was time to move on. When this opportunity presented itself, it seemed like a nice way to say goodbye. Over the years I really felt their presence around us as if they were, perhaps, girls trying to communicate through us. A lot of strange things happened.

And the idea is that they were a 70s rock band who died and returned as spirits?





Right. A lot of the songs have the feeling of the 70s. We used vintage synthesizers and the guitarist played progressive rock style. It was as if the band hadn't "made it," which is a theme that's dear to my heart. I was in many bands when I was younger, and we had the concept of making it or not making it. You just put it out in the world, and it becomes what people need or want. So the band, perhaps, wasn't successful, and it was even more tragic because they all died in this fiction.

The Spirit Girls' song lyrics match the film's narratives, but they're not a soundtrack because the albums are separate.

The Spirit Girls band and the new band, Fauxmish, are conceptual extensions of my artwork. It's sort of like the collages are storyboards or the landscape the Spirit Girls walk through, as if it were all one large film. And the songs tell the story further. I make the soundtracks for my movies but those tend not to have lyrics.

What is one of the toughest scenes you've shot for for a film?

It had to have been during *Sea of Silence*. There were five of us carrying our heavy, larger-than-life size, Spirit Girl doppelgänger ventriloquist dolls over some difficult hills and beach terrain. We carried them into a rocky sea cave and a rogue wave came in and engulfed us. The water was up to my waist; it was frightening. I was worried for all the girls and the dolls, but it was hard to tell the difference between them at that point. We were OK but later during the ending shot when the girls walk into the ocean, another rogue wave knocked us all down and pulled us under. It made for a good shot. That was a happy accident.

Before *The Spirit Girls*, you were in a punk band, and you did solo theatrical music performances. How did you transition into film and other art forms?

The films were a natural extension of my performance work. I spent years doing large-scale solo performances where I'd come out as an old woman or different animals. I would take two truckloads of props and sets when I did that, so making films felt just like being onstage but with a camera there.

I'm still learning in terms of directing. I want the next movie to be feature-length, so I'm going to take more time with it. I typically plan things out, but always have this organic, mystical feeling that whatever happens will be for the best of the movie. That usually holds true, but I will have to be a bit more in control if it's over an hour because people get bored easily.

Your films are terrifying, calming, and amusing all at once.

What I'm striving for is that mixture of emotions. That's what everyday life is like. Some days you wake up feeling great and by the end of the day, you're sad and depressed. Life is a roller coaster, waves of emotions.

You're so adept at hitting universal nerves. I saw a bootleg YouTube video of one of your films in a gallery, and the anonymous cameraperson suddenly said, "She works with nightmares. Reminds me of too many things."

You know when you wake up in the middle of the night with that feeling that something is wrong, but you don't quite know what it is? That's the feeling I try for with the movies. That strange, weird, uncanny moment.

Talk about your new band and other current projects.

I always had this dream of driving across country and photographing trailer homes. America and country folk. America has a beautiful aspect to it of simple, good people. I am interested in the Amish people and the different religious sects that coexist within America today. I've never learned anything

## IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT TO FIND UPRIGHT, POWERFUL NAKED WOMEN PICTURES.

about Christianity because my parents were very agnostic bordering on atheist. I wanted to do something really simple, so it developed into this band, Fauxmish, inspired by the simplicity of the Amish. It's almost like an offshoot of the Amish, like the Mennonites. It's a noise band offshoot, and we will wear costumes. Mine has a puritanical, Amish-inspired look.

With a bonnet?

Yes! A mourning bonnet, in this case, because I like the black look. It's a small band, just two other people at this point. We're putting out a vinyl LP before we perform live, so right now we're recording. In terms of the big picture, the band will perform in the film, which is sort of a tableau of farm life. You know the Sawdust Festival in Laguna Beach where people dress up in historical costumes and recreate paintings? The film will be painterly, like seeing a moving painting, hopefully. It will be about farm life with animals inspired by folk art assemblage.

Are the monster costumes part of that narrative?

There is, of course, the dark side to simple American farm life. The monsters are like the dredges of the unconscious, so they will go hand-in-hand. They were born out of the graveyard and the dark subconscious. It's as if you had a Bruegel or Bosch landscape



combined with an American farm realist painting. That's exactly the feeling I'm going for.

What do you say when people ask what you do?

I say I do theatrical-based work in collage and film. And then I say "people in costumes," and they say "oh yes, people in costumes," and that's the end of the subject. But now I'm making it even more complicated because the collages and films involve painting.

What made you start using paint?

I wanted the handwork to be more prominent. I was finding that, because of the Internet explosion, people thought the collages were done in Photoshop. And that was the complete

opposite of my intention. I want them to be handmade labors of love, each one a unique piece. And since the rest of the world changed over the course of the last five years, I decided I needed an even more handmade look.

Five years ago, people hardly talked about Photoshopping. It's funny to have to adapt to become more old-fashioned.

I love that you used miniature sets in your films and collage photos.

I liked going to the hobby train store and the dollhouse store, shooting the breeze with the folks there, and learning craft skills. It's a whole world out there. The people in the dollhouse store were so excited about the large scale dollhouse I made that they submitted it to a

dollhouse magazine. I got a rejection letter that it was the wrong scale. The dollhouse furniture coincided with the scale perfectly but perhaps the structure itself was too large. I was a bit crushed! Hoping for some crossover into the art world, I remained relegated to the art world. It all started because I wanted to make my dollhouse look sad from the outside. Ironic. It was I who had the sad face.

What was your first job?

I worked in a convalescent hospital for a couple years in high school.

That experience must have inspired some of your characters.



Oh definitely, big time. It gave me a love of old people. Some of them were so amazing and sweet. I think the job affected me much more emotionally than I let on at the time, and I think it contributed to some of my extracurricular activities more than I thought it would.

It's hard not to wonder about your own personal traumas when looking at your work.

There weren't any traumas on the surface. I think my traumas were self-induced over the years just by being such an oddball, and trying to figure out how to exist in this world and move through it. Perhaps I was overly sensitive to things and trying to quell emotional turbulence. Most of the struggles were self-inflicted, which is common with creative people.

It must be intense acting as the subject in your films and photographs. You've said that art can make people realize that the subconscious isn't such a scary place if there are artists out there exploring their own scary subconscious.

I think that's one of the major roles of the artist, to help everyone realize that the subconscious is a weird place, but it's just as important as the everyday existence. The artist reminds regular folks that the subconscious is there, and that they are creative too.

Your collages are calculated and meticulous, and the images are often hand cut from your own photos.

When I was making solo records, I did limited

edition collages for each one. I took on these massive projects each time a solo record came out. Over time, I found that the most successful collages were very controlled, with a theme, and created some psychological tension.

Almost like you walked into a scene in a play and you only had a chance, one moment, to understand it. You couldn't see the entire play, only that one scene. Not to cut off the narrative, but to open it up, and make people think about what's going on. I try to fill the collages with symbols and metaphors. Like a fire isn't just a fire, it's something burning from inside of a person, for example.

Did you save some of those collages from the records?

I NO LONGER BELIEVE IN THE CONCEPT OF MAKING IT OR NOT MAKING IT. YOU JUST PUT IT OUT IN THE WORLD, AND IT BECOMES WHAT PEOPLE NEED OR WANT.

They're hard to come by. I wish I'd kept more. One of the little collages from the third record ended up becoming the cover of the Sonic Youth album, *A Thousand Leaves*. That was just one of the 60 collages from a series. It was a tiny little thing, about three by four inches. It was funny how something so small ended up getting mass produced.

And the girl on the cover with hamster ears was you?

Yes, which was a good thing because I didn't need a model's release form. That would've been a disaster. The band chose it, and I was really happy.

Tell me about your early series where you created a new species, the *Femine Rodentia*.

The bad females merged with the rodents on an island and created a super-race. I was in high school, getting into a lot of trouble. There was the idea of the bad girl versus the good girl. So these bad girls get sent to an island for doing bad things. And since everyone thinks rodents are bad and should be exterminated, I wanted to have the bad women merge with the bad rodents. They got their due because they became a super-race more powerful than

anything the world has known.

When I was doing that series, I had a hard time finding images of women in standing positions. The naked women were always lying around in languid positions like they had no backbone. It was very difficult to find upright, powerful naked women pictures.

I noticed you stop using female nudes in your collages at the end of the 90s.

I used found images of naked women from men's magazines for years. There aren't a lot of those collages online. I try to keep them off my web site. My daughter was born in '99, that was the exact reason. When I started making those collages, I was trying to reclaim the female nudes in men's magazines, and give them more empowered landscapes to reside in. After my daughter was born, I saw them as someone's daughter in a way that I couldn't separate myself from.

What does your daughter think of your art?

Her father's an artist too, so she sort of has a reaction against it because it was considered something that was interloping in our life. She's been taking acting, and she's a fantastic

actress, so I'll definitely have her in my next movie. It's this very strange world that's just so normal to her. She would say, "I don't want to be an artist, it's too hard. You guys get too depressed." Any kid who gets raised with something that seems normal will want to rebel against it.

You've mentioned Ed Kienholtz's assemblage sculpture *Back Seat Dodge '38*, as a major influence. Is there one most influential person in your life?

It would have had to have been my father. He took me to see *Back Seat Dodge* at LACMA when I was a child. We waited in a long line to see it, and it had a profound effect on me. It was scary and attractive at the same time. I had never had parallel mixed feelings like that before. My dad wanted nothing more than for me to be an artist. That's why I went into music during my early years. There was very little to rebel against. My dad had an art degree from the New School after WWII and wanted to be an artist but got sidetracked into art history. He eventually specialized in Asian art, particularly ancient pictorial Chinese bronzes. He took the family all over Asia for a year when I was ten, and then we ended up in Manhattan Beach while he taught at USC.

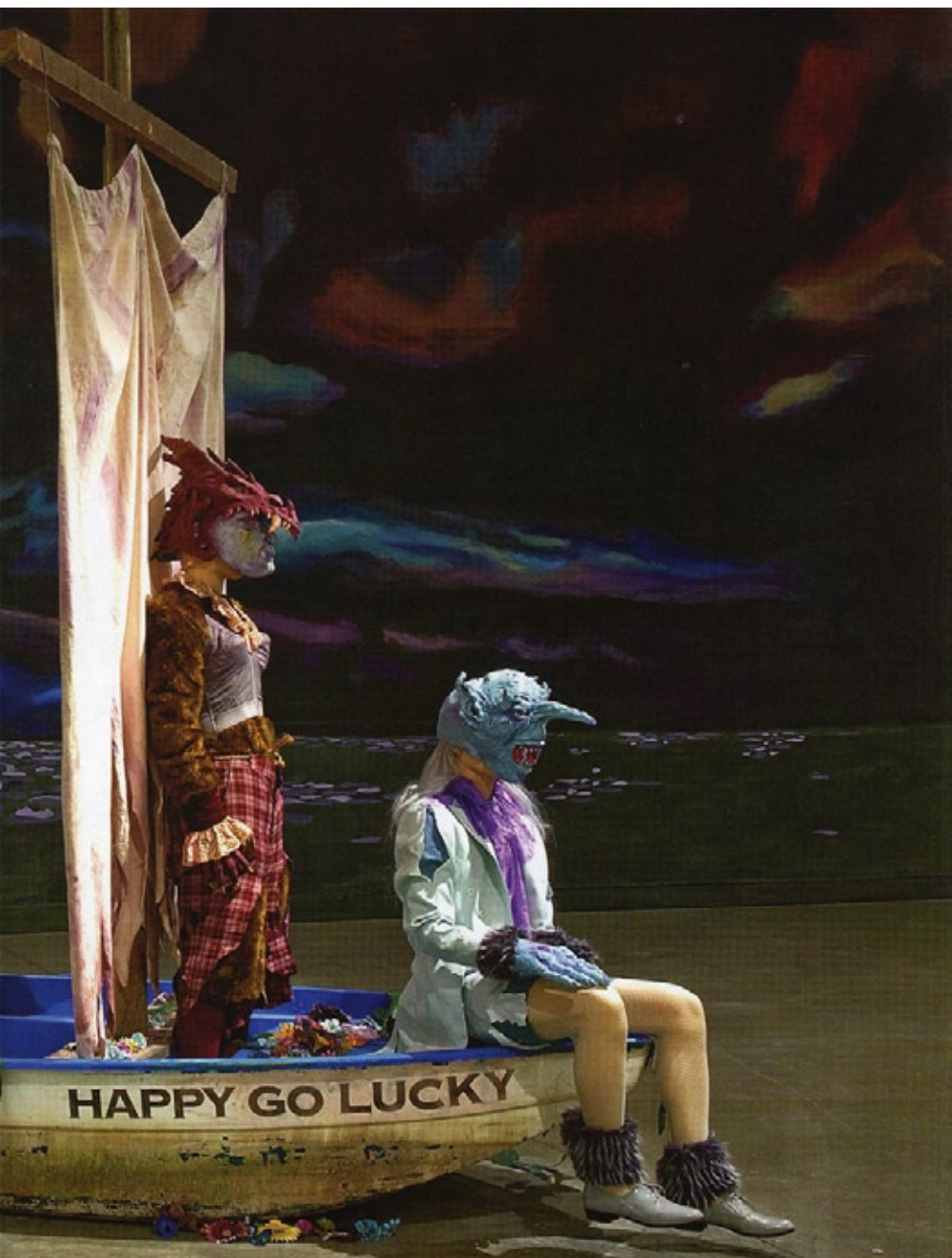
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Monster Boat (closeup)

Monster Boat >









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Many years later I worked as an installer at MOCA and we installed the Kienholtz retrospective. I got to be fully immersed in the works firsthand. I really felt a sense of theater as if ghosts were moving through stage sets. The work has an uncanny sense of time displacement and storytelling. I still am inspired by it.

Name some films and music you're into.

My all time favorite film is "The Night Hunter." It's feels like a combination of a theater piece, a film and a musical; like boundaries have been broken. The story is dark yet hopeful, sweet yet creepy. A real masterpiece of suspense. I'm also inspired by Alfred Hitchcock and any good psychological suspense movie.

Musically, the theatrical rock and progressive rock of the '70s. There are many current people doing music by whom I feel inspired by like Nick Cave, Bat for Lashes, Swans, Tindersticks, the list goes on. I like music that is narrative, theatrical and dark.

Who are some of the female artists you looked up to earlier in your career?

I wouldn't be doing collage if it weren't for Alex Smith, who was my teacher at UCLA. She

opened my eyes to the possibilities of collage and assemblage on a large scale, operating in terms of fiction and storytelling. Cindy Sherman is a huge inspiration of course, she is a master. Patty Smith. Kim Gordon. It's hard to separate music from art for me.

You and I both spent part of our childhoods on the east coast. I remember things like The Big Apple Circus, lilacs, sledding, duck ponds, and maple syrup buckets on trees. What are some things you're nostalgic for?

Beautiful memories! We had all of that in Connecticut, even our own duck pond. Skunk cabbage, streams, fields, and maple trees. We had flying squirrels on a regular basis. We dug up arrowheads and spoons made of sea shells the Indians used. There were all kinds of forest critters, bears, deer. Autumn. Snow. Fireflies. Time seemed endless, the smells were stronger. I would head out the door on my own and be in the woods for hours.

What is your spirit animal?

A bear because of the strength and power, but also because the Indians say the bear represents the unconscious dream world since they hibernate for many months.

What form will your spirit take in the next life?

If I learn what I should in this life, I won't have to come back. If not, I think I will come back as a comedian. It would be nice to make people laugh.

For more information about Mamie Weber, contact Mamieweber.com.