



If You Have a Similar Story Keep it to Yourself

A response to the work of Bridget Moser by Shawna Dempsey

What meaning does a body have in space? A female body, neither old nor particularly young. An able body, one that is white—very white! “Normal” in a North American sitcom way, with the long blonde hair that clearly marks her as a girl... the right kind of girl. Nice girl, because we know mean girls are usually brunette. Blonde girls can wear pink! This girl wears pink. And yet

Maybe this body isn't trying! The face, unadorned. The flesh, unfettered. Pretty or not pretty? The question we have been taught to pose since birth: every woman's judgement of herself and others. The world's verdict upon us, the answer to that question, will mark us: in or out.

It is difficult to tell. This body is difficult to read. It *does* things. Uncomfortable things with clean objects. Provocative gestures devoid of seduction. Almost right and yet not. Not pleasing (which is the job of blonde girls! she isn't doing her job!) and not abject, either. Where is the voyeurism in that, the scopophilia, the erotic charge of watching, which, like it or not, always underpins expectations of a female in performance?

In this regard, Bridget Moser stubbornly doesn't deliver. She doesn't seem to be performing for us, working to please us. Surrounded by what is at once emptiness and bounty, she speaks and moves as if alone. Wait a minute... She *is* alone! Profoundly alone amidst space and stuff, she cradles carefully curated consumer objects, she explores magnificently anonymous spaces, she speaks obliquely of intimacy and its absence. That is the poignancy of it. What artist Bridget Moser is doing doesn't quite make sense and yet it is so familiar. And so we watch. The banality of it all, almost boredom, troubles, in the sense of being both troubling and disrupting.

Performance in the everyday has been beautifully articulated by Judith Butler in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”. The acts of which Butler speaks are the individual gestures, stances, actions and poses repeated by each of us *ad nauseam* to construct “male” and “female”, notions that, without their performance, would not exist. Butler tells us that performance is powerful. It creates our reality. She underlines that gendered performance exists to fulfil (or fail to fulfil) a tacit social contract that perpetuates power relationships.

In contrast (or perhaps on a continuum), Moser's everyday acts are explicitly performative. Even more powerful! They demand our examination; in their presentation, they invite critique. Each word and movement seems to be a distillation. It is as if the glacier of dramatic narrative has receded, leaving Moser's actions behind. They are the detritus of identity, of self: the minutia, the private, the absurd. Laid bare, they elucidate the myth of our time: that we are happy. They are very pretty pictures (thanks, Bridget! such a good girl!) that reveal the costs of affluence, comfort and first-world exploitation of the global economy (ah, those power relationships again.)

And speaking of payment, speaking of costs ... the Me Too movement has begun unpacking the price of being a “good girl” and its corresponding benefit to patriarchy. A “good girl” looks after others’ needs and feelings before her own, does her utmost to make sure everyone is comfortable, doesn’t make a fuss. In movies, the “good girl” is smart but not sexual. For this she is rewarded with true romance and, in horror movies, the privilege of making it through the film alive. Implicit in the “good girl” role is good-natured endurance and being a cheerful good sport (endurance being one of the hallmarks of the “good girls” future role, that of being a “good wife.”) Putting up with and shutting up about has defined successful womanhood for a long time, and whether the present moment is capable of undoing these acts (to reference Butler) remains to be seen.

The content of Moser’s work focuses on consumer capitalism and the accompanying emotional void, rather than the injustices of gender. But Moser’s material—her female body—makes a gendered reading unavoidable. As Butler argues, the acts of gender, predetermined by history, are performed by our bodies as a survival tool in this society. Survival is serious. There is an uncomfortable fierceness to Moser’s art gestures. Can one be fiercely bored, fiercely alienated, fiercely alone? Fiercely a “good girl”? Moser’s performances answer “yes”. Butler also speaks of the *jouissance* in the *jou* of gender: we can derive pleasure as we play our parts. Performance is play and “a play”. Are Moser’s works playful? Yes again. It is this tangle—of intentionality, spontaneity, affect and its absence—that Moser presents to us.

Each of us, in our own bodies, performs ourselves: to survive, to fit in, to get what we want, to figure out what we want, to reinforce power and sometimes undo it. We perform because it can be fun, even while it is scary. And we watch each other, for the *jouissance* of watching and to learn the rules. Where is the rulebook? How can I be a “good girl”? Where is my humanness in this glut of pink shag and destruction, of bounty and almost certain human demise?

The power of performance is profound. As Butler shows us, it is capable of forming foundational ideas, such as gender, that most of us accept as “just the way it is” and “just the way it has always been”. Gender is but one example of how we performatively participate in the creation of our 21st century “reality”. The work of Bridget Moser performatively puts a wrinkle in it. By letting us look at her fierce “play”, she reveals failures in the collective plotline; by enacting failed and flailing gestures, she returns us to our secret selves.

Shawna Dempsey

Bridget Moser has presented work in venues across Canada and throughout the US and Europe. Moser has been a resident artist at The Banff Centre and at Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Como, Italy. The recipient of a William and Meredith Saunderson Prize for Emerging Artists and a 2016 Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Finalist Prize, her work has been featured in Canadian Art, C Magazine, Visual Arts News, Artribune Italy, The Dance Current, NOWNESS, and Mousse Magazine. Her work can be found in private and public collections in Canada and Italy and has been exhibited in venues such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, Mercer Union and Gallery TPW (Toronto), the National Arts Centre (Ottawa) and Western Front (Vancouver). She was shortlisted for the 2017 Sobey Art Award. She lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

Shawna Dempsey, with her collaborator Lorri Millan, has been creating performance and video, and curating exhibitions since 1988. Dempsey also teaches Women's and Gender Studies at University of Winnipeg and is the Co-ED of Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA) with her other collaborator, Dana Kletke.

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IMAGE | Bridget Moser, still from *I Think I Lost It*, videography by Paul Tjepkema, 2018

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