



Marie Losier, *Cassandra, the Exotico!* (2018),
Production Still. Courtesy the artist.

A PLAYGROUND FOR FILMMAKING

An Interview with Marie Losier

JOEL SCHLEMOWITZ

I've known Marie Losier for about two decades now, and have seen her progress as a filmmaker from the outset. Marie Losier has taken the film portrait into new territory: rather than taking the subjects as they are, she dresses them in crazy costumes and has them perform vignettes related to stories they tell. Her work is characterized by an oddball theatricality not usually associated with documentary and portraiture, and a madcap inventiveness recalling the trick films of Georges Méliès: a cauldron of spaghetti flies down onto a rooftop and a gaggle of performers emerge wearing rubber bathing caps, like escapees from a Max Sennett flick who have commandeered a cooking pot UFO; Tony Conrad's head floats in a black void while a violin dangling on the end of a fishing line torments it through a magical superimposition; props appear and disappear in the hands of performers on the *Alice In Wonderland*-esque stage set of a Richard Foreman theater piece. Her two feature films, *The Ballad of Genesis and Lady Jay* (2011) and *Cassandra, the Exotico!* (2018), created over years, mix the playfulness of her short films with a wider array of emotional hues.

I sat down with her just after her MoMA retrospective, *Marie Losier: Just a Million Dreams* (November 1–11, 2018), to talk with her about her films.

Marie Losier: It was a very emotional moment to do a retrospective at MoMA: it was the first time I've seen all of my work transferred to HD. I spent two and a half years doing new scans of every single film I made. Some films I didn't even remember I had – like the film of Ken and Flo Jacobs. It was like entering an archive of a time with this community of artists in New York: a history of a certain type of cinema in New York, a reminder of the strong friendships I had with so many people in the films. To see people who are no longer living – it was very intense to see Tony Conrad and not be with Tony. To see Alan Vega.

Many of my films have been shown only to a few friends in our wonderful cine-club of the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema or Ocularis Film Series, after I had arrived in New York in 1994. That was when I learned about underground films, through Bradley Eros and you and everyone who lived in that world of cinema – and who still does.

Joel Schlemowitz: I like that story you told at MoMA the other day, about going to Millennium Film Workshop. . .

ML: Brian Frye gave me this Bolex and he showed me how to use it in two minutes, like: "Here. You go like this." My background is painting, not touching celluloid, or touching cameras. I was



ABOVE Marie Losier, *L'Oiseau de la Nuit* (2019). Photo: Lucia Gerheart.
OPPOSITE Marie Losier, *Manuelle Labor* (2007), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

scared of making films. Then I went to Millennium – you and others had advised me to go to Millennium – because there was a stand for doing animation and there were classes.

Millennium was wonderful. I took a class with Ross McLaren. But before I even took the class, there was Mike Kuchar, who was at the entrance. Mike was there, with a pint of ice cream, eating it – and of course he had it all over his beard. And I was like “Wow! Who is this creature? He looks like Moses!” He was like, “Come here.” And instead of teaching me to use the Bolex – as I had come there to do – we ate ice cream and he started telling me stories about him and George Kuchar.

He put me in one of his films, *The Prayers of Cupie LaRue* (2005). I learned a lot by seeing him work. The script was written on a piece of paper that was stuck to the wall. The camera was falling all the time, and he had to redo takes. I thought, “Okay, if he does it this way then I don’t have to worry about anything.” I’ll record his stories and can imagine shooting him in a *tableau vivant*.

Coming from painting and being madly in love with silent cinema and Georges Méliès, *tableau vivant* was a way of going from painting to motion. Playing with the magic that was the beginning of cinema. Narrative didn’t really matter, the narrative was sort of like paintings, or something from a dream: everything

was possible with silent film. The most extravagant stories and visuals; appearances and disappearances; magic tricks – like a head spinning in a bottle, or a dancer in someone’s stomach. Everything I was learning about the camera I thought I would apply to Mike Kuchar. With his crazy stories I thought this would work best.

JS: Did you record the stories first?

ML: I recorded the stories, and, of course at first I didn’t know how to use my recorder. I had put the mic on the recorder, so it recorded the sound of “cree-hu, cree-hu, cree-hu” of the recording machine. So I had no stories. I had to come back to him, but he was so gracious and also he was very clumsy too, so I thought, “Okay I can do it a second time.” And then I got better stories. From those stories I created a world of visuals. I did the visuals in the studio that Bruce McClure, Andy Lampert, Caspar Stracke, you, and me shared in Queens. It was really a clumsy setup; everybody was jumping into the frame, forward, backwards.

The images were almost less work than the sound, because I didn’t have much film or money – it’s still the same! – so what I shot was precious. I’ve got three minutes of film in the camera. The sound is recorded at a separate time. I can spend time with



my subject in intimate ways, without a camera there to bother them. With video you record image and sound at the same time. It can put the person off track, because they’re self-conscious. So the analog process helps me a lot – it’s like setting up a playground for filmmaking.

Often filming was done quickly, in the studio or on the rooftops with daylight. I learned to take the energy from other friends, which made the film completely possible. Even the stupidest idea, if you do it with your heart, with all the crazy gang, it just becomes a film.

At first, my films were made as a one-day shoot. Then it became two days. Then slowly, I made longer and longer films. That’s when I met the biggest contributor at the beginning, Richard Foreman, for whom I worked making props. I didn’t start making a film about him, but the use of strong editing in his

theater work – a real collage, collapsing of sound and image – led me to work with Tony Conrad.

Tony Conrad is very much known as a minimalist artist, a serious mathematician, an intellectual. He is that, but he’s also a deeply extravagant performer, always performing, always dressed eccentrically, always creating with nothing, thinking about art as a performance. Performance is essential to his work. But it’s really how he lived his everyday life. Everything in daily life became a thing about making art. He’s wacko! His daily life was going to the thrift store, buying costumes, renting a room in a hotel, and making films with his friend Joe Gibbons.

JS: Whenever I see *Tony Conrad, DreaMinimalist* (2008) one of the moments of joy is seeing the moment when you and Tony are jumping on the bed –



Marie Losier, *Tony Conrad: DreaMinimalist* (2008), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

ML: (Laughs!) – in a pumpkin outfit! I think a lot of people are jumping on beds in my films. This was such a beautiful moment because it was in this hotel room in Buffalo that Tony rented because it cost nothing, twenty-dollars a night, something like that. At Tony's home we had no space, we couldn't shoot anything. We couldn't walk with one foot in front of the other. It was Halloween and he said, "Marie! I have the most wonderful gift for you." And so he opens this Halloween package. I'm French, so I don't really know what Halloween is, and he puts me in this costume and he plugs me into the wall and it blows up, huge, and I'm a total pumpkin! And I look so ridiculous. Joe Gibbons was there, and was like, "You guys just have to be in the frame." And this thing is incredible: if you jump this costume just goes up and down in a weird way. It's a hotel room, so we thought let's just jump and destroy the bed. So we did, for a really long time. It was a wonderful way to let go.

JS: Joe Gibbons was filming?

ML: Yes. Another crazy one! And I do have this recurring jump in my films, with Cassandra the wrestler jumping on the bed. There's something childish about jumping and breaking beds.

I spent four years working with Tony making that film. Recording of a lot of interviews over time let's you see a bigger story, and a thread of different stories. Reenacting some of Tony's performances – Tony's pickle film in 1972, or the puppet show he did with his mom – provided a playground for acting, costumes, and props.

JS: To me this is one of the aspects of your portrait films that's very different than what people typically think a portrait is: the person observing shouldn't be interfering, should try to provide a faithful representation. In your portraits you intervene a lot, you have people dress in costumes, you don't just take things as they are.

ML: You know I have no theoretical background or training or schooling behind me. I only have the school of making. I entered filmmaking in a very specific time in New York City, and the people I met didn't separate life from creating: from Genesis to Tony, and even Cassandra in another way, or George Kuchar and Mike Kuchar – they lived the life of making.

There is a lot of playfulness in my films, like a playground for finding the truth of someone. When you actually play you can let go of something intellectual, or thought-through, or too carefully explained. When there is a playground you're letting go, you can even be stupid or silly. When you're playing and performing, you're going to another level of yourself that you wouldn't expose. Something very truthful, very deep, comes to me about the person I'm working with.

JS: Even the films that aren't really portraits involve the community around you. *Flying Saucy* (2006), for instance. I can't think of a film of yours that doesn't have people at the center of it.

ML: It's true. I used to make abstract painting. I got really turned off to that quickly and went into making collage. Then I got into making portraits and working with puppets. For me, as a French person coming to New York, I was overwhelmed by the city and its architecture. But then I found that it's full of people, it's full of eccentrics, and that's where I found my heart. Today, fifteen years later, I'm really close. I went from filming outside, to really close: a macro lens focusing on an eye, or nose, or aspect of the skin, the dents of a scar on the skin of Cassandra. More and more I go into the body. This is something I didn't realize until I saw all the films together at MoMA.

JS: I'd like to talk about *Byun, Objet Trouvé* (2012). It doesn't film the subject of the portrait in a passive way, but one thing that strikes me is how much the style of filming rhymes or echoes with his artwork.

ML: I think all my films reflect something of the work of the person: in the film's rhythm, in the way it's collaged together in editing, or in the way it's shot. *Byun* is a North Korean artist, and he escaped the dictatorship there. He's a very talented painter. When he came to New York he started collecting these found objects, finding trash objects and buying some. He started transforming them so they became inhabited by stories. They would be articulated and he would often add motors. He slowly accumulated so many things and transformed them that his house became a museum. Because he's not very good at speaking English, I thought the best way to make a portrait of *Byun* – because I was very much attracted to his objects – was animation. His objects reminded me of Švankmajer, they wanted to be animated on film. He's the center of all of this family of objects, the king of the kingdom. I had to animate him with his objects.

JS: I think you've said, when you started filming with *Genesis* you didn't realize it was going to be a feature at the outset.

ML: Not at all. I met her by surprise. I didn't know who she was – I've never been a fan of people I've made films of: I've been a friend rather than a fan. I don't think I could make a film about someone I completely adore in that sense.

When I met *Genesis* – she was already a she at that time – I didn't know about *Throbbing Gristle*. *Genesis* was at the Knitting Factory. She was the third performer and was just reciting poems. And her voice was so beautiful; like Lou Reed has a voice, like Bob Dylan has a voice. She remained in my mind, and the next day I met her at a gallery and I walked on her feet, literally. When

she turned around and I excused myself she looked at me. All her teeth were golden. She looked crazy. But she was so gentle and she said, “What do you do?” in this kind of English/Scottish accent. And I told her I make films. The conversation lasted maybe five minutes and she said, “Come over to my home, I think we have to meet again.” So I said, “Okay.”

One week later I went, and it was Lady Jaye that opened the door, who is her wife. They started looking a bit the same already. Same haircut. They had a mole that was the same. It was very strange. When the door opened I didn't understand what was going on. And they said, “I think you're the one we've been waiting for.” Like a prophet, you know. “You have to be doing a film on us.” I thought they were a rock band because they were going on tour with Psychic TV. What was Psychic TV? I always wanted to go with a rock band on a tour. That was America, you know. Of course, I had no idea what that meant except in movies by D. A. Pennebaker, and I thought, “Whoa! If it's like the Rolling Stones it's going to be incredible.”

But actually, it's really boring. You go on a bus. You're tired. They do their show for one night, but they do it ten times and it's the same show, same sandwich, same basement, same weird fans. So I thought, “Well, I've filmed it once, twice, three times, okay I'm done.” I thought it would be a short film. Then I really saw that there was something between Gen and Jaye. It was a love story. And it touched me deeply because it was also a crazy love story. Not the usual one. A strange love story where they would change their bodies to become one. And that was freaky. But it was also very sweet when you know them. And infinite. It was an art creation. That a love story – and I'm so much about love – could be an art piece.

I started filming other things. I would come to their house often, the studio was there, and I saw their archive. I discovered that Gen was linked to William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, the Beat Generation, collage, and then collage of the body. I didn't know where it would go, but there was something to hold onto. So I started going regularly to their house, and then one year passed, two years passed. Then I knew I was hooked. I didn't know it would take seven years in total.

But Jaye passed away during this time. That was so traumatic that I stopped filming, because I didn't know what to do. I wanted to be there for Gen. Only because Gen asked me to finish the film – the love she felt for Jaye was so infinite – did I work on it again. She got me archival material of Lady Jaye.

JS: You weren't familiar with Psychic TV and Throbbing Gristle, but when Gen and Lady Jaye said, “You're the one,” did they know your films?

ML: They knew nothing about me! It was like usual: instinct. Something felt in the stomach, and they were feeling the same. So I thought: “Okay, that's the way to go.” You can always get out of a bad situation if it's the wrong story. But my instinct told me there was a story, and it's true, there was a big New York story here.

JS: And with Cassandra? How did that project come about?

ML: That's the first film I've made outside of the context of being in our world of free spirits and underground cinema in New York City.

He's into lucha libre, about which I knew nothing, but I felt a connection to Cassandra. Cassandra is this free-spirited man who is outside the system, fighting against the system, not accepted by the system. I was very sick when I was young, and also have a lot of health issues now. Going from sickness to studying dance – I was into circus training, then dance and gymnastics – there is something related to sickness and the body, the mutation of the body, and the pain of the body, that attracted me to his performance and theatricality.

With Cassandra and lucha libre, he's kind of the epitome of performance. He only exists as Cassandra when he's under the limelight of the ring, which is like a theater, like a film set. He's a gay lucha libre wrestler. Gay also in the sense that he wears glitter, costumes, and makeup as part of his persona when he fights in the ring. When he's not in the ring he's Cassandra: a Mexican-American who's had a really tough life, really poor, coming from





OPPOSITE Marie Losier, *Cassandro, the Exotico!* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy of Cassandro.
 BELOW Marie Losier, *Slap! The Gondola* (2009). Photo: Bernard Yenelouis.

Juarez, the most dangerous city in the world; a border city with gangs and a lot of drugs. This tension between total joy and total pain; broken and happy; masculine and feminine – this was also this kind of counter-culture.

It was also a challenge because I didn't want to film him just as he wanted to be filmed, as the shining Cassandro of TV. It was very hard to confront someone who didn't want to show his fragility. But then something happened and he opened up.

In this film I used video as well for the first time. I didn't know how hard it would be to film someone who jumps around and does crazy things really fast. With the Bolex – since I have to wind the spring all the time – I would lose the one moment he's jumping from the balcony or running to do something that I should have in the film.

So that's the first time in my approach I thought, "Hmmm, let's use a little bit of video to catch those moments?" Video also allowed me to spend time waiting for the moment when could reveal himself. Even though there are a lot of moments with Cassandro moving fast in the ring there are also longer shots in this film. More than in some of my others films. There are moments that time stops.

JS: I want to know about your work programming films. Has this been something separate from making the films, or in what ways have the two activities influenced each other?

ML: I think the two influenced each other enormously because I was scared to be an artist. The word "programming" was something I didn't understand back then. But it took on a meaning when I encountered the Ocularis Film Series and the Robert Beck Memorial Cinema, more or less at the same time. How lucky I was, even though curating is not what we think it is. A lot of time is spent sitting at your desk, writing emails. Doing programming means translating, having synopses, getting screening rights, checking the copy of the film – is it the right one? – checking the quality, arranging flights for artists. It was a great learning experience, and exhausting after fifteen years. It helped me to be discreet as an artist: I could have a job and not have to say that I'm making films. I didn't have to worry if my films were good or not. (Laughs.) I could hide out.

JS: Well now MoMA's blown your cover.

