

# THE FORGETORY

ISSUE 1: EROS

## Paul McCarthy at Hauser & Wirth

by Noah Dillon



Paul McCarthy/Damon McCarthy, photographs taken during the filming of 'Rebel Dabble Babble,' 2011 – 2012, photo: Joshua White, courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

This summer, Hauser & Wirth presented a sprawling, multi-site series showcasing much of Paul McCarthy's recent work at five different New York locations: the piers in West Chelsea, the gallery's 18th street and 69th street locations, at the Park Avenue Armory, and on Randall's Island during the Frieze Fair. All of the work is described as being part of an ongoing video and installation project.

In Chelsea, McCarthy's "Rebel Dabble Babble," a video installation made in collaboration with his son Damon and with the actor James Franco, is the last of the exhibitions to open. It premiered last spring at The Box in Los Angeles, a gallery owned by McCarthy's daughter Mara. The multi-channel installation presents a horrifying vision of contemporary America hung primarily on the 1955 B-film *Rebel Without a Cause* and the sordid triad of the film's stars, James Dean and Natalie Wood, and its director, Nicholas Ray. Consisting of video, still photography, and two film-set houses that were meticulously recreated in the gallery space, McCarthy's installation parodies the original

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movie, its characters, and its players as they depict scenes of carnality and violence. The characters (both historical and imaginary) inhabit dynamic subjective positions throughout the artwork, obscuring the boundaries between one self and another, and between representation and reality.

For those who don't remember the original film, *Rebel Without a Cause* begins with authoritative social workers counseling three youths at the local police station, each having been brought in on various charges of delinquency. The kids (Dean as Jim Stark, Wood as Judy, and Sal Mineo as Plato) are given pop psychology lectures suggesting that he or she is trying to alert their parents to their feelings of inadequacy, neglect, or alienation—that their misbehavior cloaks Oedipal demands for affection and respect. This scene isn't mimicked in McCarthy's version, but the show does take that underlying psychology to extremes.

Much of the drama in *Rebel Without a Cause* centers on the inability of the three protagonists to assimilate into socially acceptable roles, either within their families, the local community, or among peers. Towards the climax of the film they abscond to a vacant mansion and pantomime a realtor's tour before they play house, discuss their domestic anxieties, and invent a surrogate family. There are hints of Plato's non-platonic desire for Jim and the whole scene is made more florid by tabloid rumors that during and after the film's production Ray, Dean, Mineo, and Wood shared a bungalow at the Château Marmont where they maintained a debauched *ménage à quatre* that was creepily familial.

The characters in McCarthy's *Rebel* are the same or similar to those in the original movie, and they, along with Ray, Dean, Mineo, and Wood, are each represented by one or more people in McCarthy's cast. Judy/Natalie Wood is essentially one character played by two women—one is Elyse Poppers, who has worked on previous McCarthy projects and is the most constant performer in the troupe. She also appears at the Park Avenue Armory installation and is reproduced in full-sized resin models and video for "Paul McCarthy: Life Cast," at the gallery's 69<sup>th</sup> Street location. Poppers's character is the locus of the show's complicated web of familial and sexual relationships. *Rebel*

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director Nicholas Ray/Judy's father/Jim Stark's father/an unnamed pornographer all represent one overbearing and lascivious archetype played by multiple men, including McCarthy. Occasionally several of them appear on-screen at the same time, each with an enormous prosthetic, phallic nose. Jim Stark/James Dean is played by Franco, except for a number of genuinely pornographic scenes in which Stark/Dean is portrayed by the real life porn star James Deen.<sup>1</sup>

Poppers's Judy/Wood character is abused and/or molested by all of the men she encounters, no matter whether she is playing their sister, daughter, *ingénue*, or paramour. These encounters are taped by one or more of the father figures and form the bulk of the show. The madness, fighting, screwing, screaming, and exaggerated representations of filmmaking are broadcast in a jumble of non-sequential videos playing simultaneously across the walls of the gallery and within the house-sculptures.

The chaotic nature of the show, with its aural bleed and its hyper-stimulating barrage of juxtaposed videos, is overwhelming and difficult to parse as a straight narrative, hence the titular "babble." It's perhaps unnecessary to consider the project in terms of its own tale, apart from the original film and its creation. Included in a rear gallery is a selection of more than 400 production stills, displayed along four walls in order, giving an overarching view of the story. This simplification straightens the narrative but represents it absent much of its power, which resides precisely in its confusion and conflation of identities through the pastiche of tormented/tormenting vignettes. It's important to viscerally understand Judy/Wood as an unstable admixture of performer and performance, approached by men who may variously be a stud, a father, an abuser, an authority, or a submissive, and that every other character inhabits the same dilemma. McCarthy is able to make the entire show an assault of aural, visual, and sensual excitation while maintaining the sense that there is a great deal still hidden within that bombardment. Part of this is simply the impossibility of understanding all the dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> Deen (née Bryan Sevilla) has since complained that Franco treated him as the butt of a joke, though this criticism may lose some of the torque when considered against Deen's own use of a novelty pseudonym alluding to the famous actor. And his presence in the cast further confounds the differences between actor and character, past and present, teen icon and sex object, legitimate actor and porn star.

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amidst the shouting, grunting, and banging going on. But there are also hints at deeper, larger problems entangled in the imagery and noise.

Although catalogue essays by both the elder and younger McCarthy have emphasized the installation as being concerned with Hollywood and the psychic tortures of actors inhabiting states of extremity, we perform many of the same processes in daily life, if often to a lesser degree. Vicarious participation, the adoption of alien personae, and the confusion of who we are with what we do are not unfamiliar to ordinary citizens, though the extent to which “Rebel’s” agonists experience these situations is particularly acute.

In some videos we see Judy/Wood and the other protagonists argue or have sex—scenes which are then duplicated as cinematic re-enactments, often with handheld cameras being shoved, cock-like, towards the actors in gestures of mechanical and visual penetration. Judy/Wood fights with her father/Nick Ray and stabs him to death; whether that event is rehearsal or pathos is unclear. She then reproduces the same event with another nearly identical man, while the first one trails them with a camera. She masturbates on her bed and is doubly invaded by twin pornographers shooting her and each other. In another scene, she lies in a bathtub, getting covered with a yellow, pudding-like substance extruded from bags held below the naked anus of her father; soon the two switch positions and she soaks him.<sup>2</sup> While the character of Judy in *Rebel Without a Cause* appealed to her dad in a more or less traditional, static, Electra mode, all the characters here trade places constantly as they gratify, humiliate, and observe one another. They transition fluidly from positions of power to those of obedience, from desire to hatred, from identity to identity.

The house filling much of the exhibition space is the set used by the McCarthys during production. It has been re-constructed exactly as it was at the end of taping, having aggregated all the sexual and psychological violence enacted on its premises. The building is composed in two parts—one enclosed save for windows and peepholes, the other bisected to display its disturbed inner life. Videos are projected around the house on the gallery walls and also within. Haphazard, rectangular peepholes have been cut

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<sup>2</sup> In “Paul McCarthy: Life Cast,” Poppers is similarly covered with blue casting goo, an image that takes on amniotic qualities when her image is birthed as a series of resin statues.

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into the homes to encourage our voyeuristic consumption of the hardcore porn on display throughout the space. Like the rest of the cast, the set itself is a Janus, modeled on both Ray's aforementioned bungalow and the home of Jim Stark, the original film's lead.

Signs of violence and violation build up on the house's corpus. Materials and detritus are strewn about—heavy-duty cables running in through windows, stains and crust, soda cans and champagne bottles by the wall outside, and dead flowers on the kitchen table. The semi-cavernous suburban domicile has been viciously renovated, giving it several extra orifice-like openings. The peepholes—cut with a circular saw by a man playing Ray/Judy's father/Mr. Stark—allow viewers to look into or through the house, spying some of the videos in a way that more concretely sites them within the home. Judy and Ray/her father, who take turns ramming or beating the wall with a phallic length of steel pipe in a deranged act of territorialization, have inflicted other punctures.

The house is one of the more powerful and insistent images in McCarthy's production and a generator for much of the action. Following an era wherein home-ownership manifested as a kind of national, cataclysmic fetishism, it doesn't seem too reaching to suggest that McCarthy's houses and the things done in them are pathologically inextricable. Family homes are private models of the public sphere, where we are expected to foster respectable attitudes and behaviors. Here, the home of the actor and the character are totally confused, uninhibited, and consequently demented. When, satirizing the original movie, Jim Stark's father (played by McCarthy) dons an apron and wanders dumbly around the set, his pants around his ankles, staining himself with shit-brown gravy from the craft services table, we get a sense of the home's warping power: he is obliged by his domesticity to inhabit simultaneous, contradictory roles, becoming the father, mother, child, creator, spectator, and so on.

The show's action is pathologically similar to the febrile and lurid depictions of home-ownership on reality TV in building and remodeling shows,<sup>3</sup> whose dramatic arc usually revolves around a protagonist's unfulfilled desire being resolved by attractive and dexterous men suggestively handling various tools. In some of these shows, such

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as ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003-present), the family is exhibited as cheerily abject: suffering, but not grievously, with none of their private darkness disclosed. They often break down in cathartic tears when their remade home is unveiled at the episode's end; whatever struggles they face have been overcome by the power of perfect home-ownership. No mention is made of the way that such ideals helped, however indirectly, to bloat the United States' housing market, nor is any attention paid to the new financial burden faced by many of these families when their new dream homes command higher property taxes and energy bills. None of the action on these TV shows is overtly sexual but, as in "Rebel Dabble Babble," the voyeuristic thrill of watching people perform predetermined roles to a satisfied, ecstatic climax is certainly present: they appear to have obtained an experience of fulfilled desire and, consequently, so have we. The whole manufactured and taped event is pornographic.

The aesthetics of porn have tinted so much of culture—in reality TV, political stagecraft, the housing bubble and its bond traders, or the way we read *Rebel Without a Cause*. Everything is reduced to a tortured performance of need, delivery, and gratification, tailored to satisfy its viewers' proclivities, and as such, appearance takes precedence over content. This is a confusion fully inhabited by any actor, perhaps especially by method actors such as Dean: the division between a projected character and the dramaturge's substantive personhood becomes indistinct. The animus or likeness promised by the actor is mistaken for the truth of the matter. They and we are induced to accept that a fantastic image is real and full, that the market is working, that sex is easy and uncomplicated, that poll-tailored sloganeering yields good policy, that reality programs (and hence reality) follow meaningful, purposive plotlines. The pornification of the world is a curse. To be clear, the problem isn't with people performing or fucking, either here or in adult video stores, or at shareholder meetings, or wherever. Rather it's the seemingly ubiquitous preference for a flattering façade that is so poisonous.

In "Rebel Dabble Babble," McCarthy takes the original film and contemporizes it, expands it, disturbs and perverts it. His characters aren't Freudian egos but Lacanian subjectivities. They're not children searching for adulthood; they're grownups arrested in their development. Their amoral and obscene demands mask an abyssal, vacuous core instead of pointing to a desire for fulfillment. They don't play suggestively at

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eroticism; they brutally impose their prurience. Rather than stereotypes of young people, they reflect us: our world, our television, our politics, our economy. Maybe we're a darker culture than existed in 1955—probably not. All the elements were there in the original film, waiting for McCarthy to run with them. It sucks, but it's true.