

Art in America

October 2013
By Catherine Damman

Review: My Barbarian at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects



LOS ANGELES MY BARBARIAN Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

In *My Barbarian*'s recent exhibition, as on the analyst's couch, all roads pointed to one source: the mother. For "Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse," the Los Angeles-based collective—Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade—created a provocative amalgam of maternal imagery. Yet, like psychoanalysis itself, *My Barbarian*'s work only further tangles the gnarled relationships and histories it purports to unpack.

The show's unwieldy title is a mash-up of a famous 1948 manifesto coauthored by Eleanor Roosevelt, and a 1929 speech given by Freud's acolyte-turned-competitor Melanie Klein. Both historical figures appear in the video *Working Mother* (2013), in which they are played by venerable feminist artists in the L.A. art world, Eleanor Antin and

Mary Kelly, respectively, who have themselves dealt with the subject of maternity. Other scenes in the video depict tender intergenerational exchanges between the artists and their own mothers. The earnestness and humor of these conversations contrast with self-consciously "acted" vignettes on the themes of maternity and domesticity, including *My Barbarian*'s own deadpan delivery of the Shangri-Las' 1960s ballad "I Can Never Go Home Anymore."

While recurring images of mothers ostensibly link each of these segments, the video's varied styles and tones also defamiliarize traditional representations of motherhood, opening the way for new images of maternal care. Perhaps the most famous mother-and-child duo appears in the video's finale, as the group performs a dance based on Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Amid a black-box setting, the trio alternates cradling one another languidly; a shuffling of steps and awkward maneuvering of positions mark each hasty transition. Willfully reversing the Renaissance master's somber tribute to suffering and eternal salvation, the re-presented "sculpture" is constantly shifting and impermanent, subject to the episodic logic of the theater.

The exhibition opened with *My Barbarian* staging an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's 1932 play *The Mother*. Masks and drawings used in that performance flanked a triangular plywood stage in the gallery. Brecht's drama examines a mother's growing radicalism amid restless factory workers on the eve of the October Revolution. In the hands of *My Barbarian*, the didactic play becomes a timely and knowing caper, self-consciously mobilizing the playwright's influential theories for both comedic effect and contemporary political relevance.

To add to an already dizzying list of historical references, the play's props and scenography draw on various modernist sources, including the political drawings of German artist Käthe Kollwitz, Surrealist imagery and the woodcuts of Mary Cassatt. These artifacts seem to embody Klein's famous notion that artists produce objects to work through their own mommy issues. Another of the psychoanalyst's major contributions was to identify the depressive position: the infant's learned ability to reconcile notions of the mother as the one who both frustrates and gratifies. Equal parts sincere and sardonic, *My Barbarian* extrapolates this ability to sustain contradiction to great effect.

—Catherine Damman

My Barbarian:
Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in Creative Impulse, 2013, HD video, 29 minutes; at Susanne Vielmetter.