

APPEX!

HANNAH PIPER BURNS

Venus Retrograde

February 24 – August 12, 2018



Your Host, 2017



Your Host, 2017



False Idylls, 2017

APEX: HANNAH PIPER BURNS

A CONVERSATION

How did you first embark on the material of these reality shows—*Bachelor in Paradise*, *The Bachelor*, and *The Bachelorette*—for your subject? How has your work changed over the course of nearly ten years you’ve worked on these materials?

I have been watching these shows and their spinoffs since 2008. Originally, I was compelled by the baroque banality of reality television, as well as its holistic commitment to failure. But the deaths of two former contestants on the show—Gia Allemand in 2013 and Eric Hill in 2014—catalyzed something in me. The first pieces I made with this material are in a very real sense tributes to Eric and Gia. While making them, other aspects of the footage began to speak to me, especially the parts that served as padding around the more dramatic and entertaining moments in the shows. Also, my interest in using footage from *Bachelor in Paradise* crystallized around a crisis that happened during the production of the most recent season, when filming was temporarily suspended due to allegations of sexual misconduct. At their heart, all the works I make with this footage are tragic—they deal with that spectrum of tragedy from the more superficial and quotidian to the existential and even metaphysical.

You pull out multiple dimensions of time from these reality shows: the timeline of filming a season, the contestants’ siloed perspectives, and the broader sense of time from the viewers who have access to multiple contestant viewpoints.

The ways that these shows warp and manipulate time, both for the viewers and the contestants are myriad! It’s like how gravity behaves on other planets: six weeks in *Bachelor Nation* is the equivalent of eighteen Earth days. Then of course there’s the lapse in time between a contestant’s experiences of their lived and mediated realities, and the somewhat unpredictable period after the show airs but while they are again under intense surveillance—now in “real” time.

Surveillance is, at its heart, about time as a function of accountability. It’s also relational, in that the act of surveilling is a hunt for accountability. If surveillance is close scrutiny and love is profound attention, then they are, maybe not in the healthiest of ways, bound to touch each other at certain points. And because of that it’s not unbelievable that a show about the quest to find love would incorporate surveillance so heavily. Contestants surveil each other, they are surveilled by camera operators and produc-

There's also a lot of "set dressing" throughout the exhibition that plays with cinematic and domestic artifice, such as the fake plants and fake candles. Like reality television, these materials flirt quixotically with authenticity, and we take perverse pleasure in their slippage, like we would enjoy something that's "blue raspberry" flavored. It's a synthetic aesthetic. It's decidedly suburban. The air freshener installed in *False Idylls* is plastic made to look like stoneware, and dispenses a chemical compound meant to approximate the extremely generic "tropical." It is a form of domestic surveillance based on motion detection, reminding the viewer of their physical presence as they move through the space, insisting on a particular sensory experience of the work.

***Your Host* is a three-channel video installation that focuses on the shows' longtime host Chris Harrison. A host traditionally is someone who receives guests and entertains people. Biologically, there are also host animals or plants that parasites live off of. There are different purposes to being a host in the broad sense of the term. Were you thinking about this in Harrison's role? How did you come to develop this work?**

In making *Your Host* I had two manifestations of Chris Harrison in mind, both of which are based in ancient Greek mythology and also, as it happens, anagrammable from his name. First, there's Chiron, the wounded healer. In this role, Harrison is the divorcé who comforts and advises potential fiancés. He is also the shepherd through the contestants' edits, helping them process their sometimes dissonant lived and mediated realities toward what Rachel E. Dubrofsky, in her book *The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching The Bachelor and The Bachelorette*, calls the "therapeutics of the self." Then, there's Charon, the ferryman between the worlds of the living and the dead. In this role, Harrison is the bridge between our world and Bachelor Nation. He is a psychopomp: he is the guide, and he sees keenly, but he does not judge.

In making *Your Host*, I used footage from the "Women/Men Tell All" and "After the Final Rose" episodes of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* across multiple seasons, because these episodes represent the most potent concentration of these manifestations. Harrison as the host has an important job during filming, but I wanted to focus on moments when both the host and contestants have left Bachelor Nation and are asked to reflect on their time there, and how it has been packaged for the public.

The third element of *Your Host* is the pantheon: the studio audience, our surrogates.

In our earlier conversations, you referred to theorist Alexis Shotwell's book *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. In many ways, our privacy too is compromised: greater

surveillance, social media, and the conveniences of having virtually everything accessible online. We are essentially signing up to give up our privacy. How do you bring out these aspects in your work?

I think there is an element of human sacrifice that seeps through all my work with this particular source material. That's part of the fascination, right? Especially since every year like clockwork, fifty new contestants step right up and into this arena. It feels very ritualistic and spiritual, and often the contestants talk about their experiences in those terms, as a kind of cosmic gamble, a reckoning with the core of their being. It's a gauntlet! A crucible! We all sacrifice ourselves on the altar of privacy in some way, but the contestants are like the true initiates — we as the viewers are merely devotees.

For me as an artist, what I do with this footage is an echo of what's already been done. It's a distillation of a distillation. Like the shows, I am also trying to tell a story with the images and pathos of the contestants, much like I try to make meaning through my everyday practices of social media surveillance. So I try to be generous, and expansive, with the materials I have to work with and my treatment of them, as I would want others to be with me. Because even if you know what you're signing up for—and I think this is the case with all kinds of terms of service and self-commodification through social media—you don't really know what you're signing up for.

What is your interest in these shows from a fan and critical perspective? How do you negotiate the two?

Ambivalence has always been a core value of my practice! There's been a rise in a kind of fandom, not at all specific to *The Bachelor* franchise, which tries to have its cake and eat it, too, by applying a critical lens to popular culture while still reveling in it. *The Bachelor* shows have had a surge in this particular fandom over the last few years, and I feel like my fandom has itself evolved to take different shapes. The shows are also evolving in response to their audiences, now in a more accelerated way thanks to the instant feedback machines of social media.

There have been many incidents, including but definitely not limited to the deaths of Eric and Gia and the allegations of sexual misconduct on *Bachelor in Paradise*, have made me grapple with my complicity as a viewer. My work stems from that grappling. So rather than turning away in those moments, instead I turn towards, and even more fervently. I look even more closely.

BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Piper Burns (American, born 1984) is a conceptual multimedia artist in Portland, Oregon who plays fast and loose with the idea of “mediums” and “materials”. Her projects, which span video, object, performance, installation, text, and interactivity, have recently been shown widely across the United States and Canada, including recently at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Indie Bits festival in Columbia, South Carolina, the Winnipeg Underground Film Festival, and as part of Physical Education’s “Say When”. Her video “Outer Darkness” won “The Unreal Reality Award” at the 43rd Northwest Filmmakers’ Festival, and she was an inaugural New Media Fellow at Portland-based media center Open Signal in the Spring of 2017. She received her MFA in New Genres from the San Francisco Art Institute, and a BA in Art and Art History from St. Mary’s College of Maryland. She has called Portland home since 2009.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

False Idylls, 2017

Single-channel video with sound
5 minutes, looping
Courtesy of the artist

Live Laugh Love, 2018

Vinyl text installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Your Host, 2017

3-channel video installation with sound
13 minutes, looping
Courtesy of the artist

The Heart, this House, a Palimpsest, 2018

Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Cover: still from *Your Host*, 2017

APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum’s 125-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art, The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Exhibition Series Sponsors.



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