HANNAH PIPER BURNS

Venus Retrograde

February 24 – August 12, 2018
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-
ers, and then they are surveilled by the public. Because the shows both stretch and compress time while creating entertainment that trafficks in objectivity and its discontents, it creates a unified vision and narrative that renders the multiple subjectivities behind the images invisible.

*False Idylls* is an unsettling patchwork that you’ve described as being at once banal and profound, showing a spectrum of love and tragedy. Some of the filming is cinematic, particularly in the way the lighting is set and the architecture is captured. But you distinguish this as more a part of that surveillance.

Part of the brilliance of *The Bachelor* franchise and other reality shows of its ilk is the blending of cinematic and surveillant aesthetics and tactics to create a feeling of dualized omniscience: it combines moments where contestants are hyperaware of the camera with less aware, or even unaware, “b-roll,” providing both macro (footage taken from cranes, drones, and helicopters) and micro (close-ups of raindrops, insects, and so on) perspectives on the scene. So even though ultimately a lot of information is left on the cutting room floor, there is this illusion of providing lots of information.

My goal with *False Idylls* was to tease out multiple points of view or experiences of a place and a time. Rather than center the contestants and their experiences, I focus on the movements and perspectives of the cameras. Rather than attempt to create a linear narrative from the footage, I use intuitive re-assembly and dream logic to develop vignettes where the body behind the gaze is not subject to the laws of nature, and doubles and doppelgangers abound. The result is a sustained hauntological meditation on isolation and violation.

In *Venus Retrograde*, you’ve incorporated a sense of the very fabric of place in *The Heart, this House, a Palimpsest*. There is a strange dichotomy of newness in each season of the show that is echoed by a complete interior makeover, yet the construct of the show and the host remain the same. It is essentially the same tragedy retold. In your installations, you use the language of the interior spaces that try to tell a different story.

The text piece *Live Laugh Love* and the wall-mounted sculptural piece *The Heart, this House, a Palimpsest* are at once ways to ground the digital works in material reality and add twists to the kaleidoscope of subjectivities that collide throughout the exhibition. Poetry is a distillation of language, and creating the poems of *Live Laugh Love* is similar to the distillation of the “media texts” in *False Idylls* and *Your Host*.

*The Heart, this House, a Palimpsest* models some of the concepts of time I’ve been talking about through positioning the Bachelor Mansion—the house where *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* are partially set every season—as a symbolic and physical repository of memory. A palimpsest is a text marked by both erasure and trace.
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 Process* their sometimes dissonant lived and mediated realities also the shepherd through the contestants’ edits, helping them

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 it 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.

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

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.
**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.