

BOMB

Cate Giordano by Amy Ruhl



Installation view of *After the fire is gone*, 2017. Images courtesy of the artist and Microscope Gallery

Exploring Cate Giordano's installation, *After the fire is gone*, on opening night, I am a privileged spectator. I've already seen the titular film and empathized with the quiet dignity of waitress Dolly Presley, a protagonist who is remarkably relatable despite being fashioned through hyperbole, a joyous femme grotesque. I know Dolly will be confronted with a past romance that, by her own choosing, can only thrive within a domestic dream where people are interchangeable with their sculptural doubles, and objects are serenaded with the same sincerity by which humans transmit love to one another.

I am struck by the intent and care with which this narrative has been dissected and dispersed across an installation organized into the three sets—a diner, a living room, and a taxi—that stage Dolly's musical fantasies. The film plays in looped segments on television sets nestled among the sculptures. An entire world has been constructed here—one that functions on recognition, rather than abstraction. We must recognize these signifiers of Americana, the cherry pies and trucker hats, so they can be made strange again. Like Dolly, Giordano knows the dangers of nostalgia—a past that will never live up to our constructed memories. She lets us see the dust that's piled up on her end tables.

—Amy Ruhl



Installation view of *After the fire is gone*, 2017. Images courtesy of the artist and Microscope Gallery

Amy Ruhl

Maybe we should start with Dolly Presley's origin story.

Cate Giordano

Okay. It's not exactly a glamorous one.

AR

I think the more banal the better.

CG

A friend of mine, Ashley Perez, gave me a country mix CD many years ago that just said "Dolly Presley" in Sharpie on it. And I was like, Wow, that's such a great hybrid.

AR

Was Dolly Parton or Elvis Presley on there?

CG

There was nothing by either one of them. It was mostly George Jones or something. At the time, I didn't think anything of this CD, other than that it had this great name. And maybe a year or so later, it hit me that Dolly Presley could be a character, with this really interesting costume. I went to the costume shop—I was living in Boston at the time—and I got this terrible Marie Antoinette wig for like twenty bucks. Then I got an Elvis suit—a vinyl one that was really hot. And I got these fake boobs. That's how it started. The first time I performed as Dolly Presley, it was a horrible kind of drag act for this dance night at a dive bar. And then I didn't pick up the project for another seven or eight years. The character didn't come together at that poorly conceived dance night, but there was something to it that I kept thinking about. Years later, I started doing some performances with her where I would sing karaoke aimlessly, performing with these sculptures of a band on a stage. And she was this out-of-nowhere, mystical character, almost in the place where you would expect her, on a stage. As I started working on the movie *After the fire is gone* (2017), I realized that in order for her to be a real character, she had to come off the stage. When

she started being a waitress at a diner and doing these everyday tasks, that was a breakthrough. The more banal I made her, the more I rooted her in everyday activities, the more interesting and alive she became.

AR

It's interesting to think of her starting as kind of a drag performance because she does not, as a character, seem like an exhibitionist whatsoever.

CG

No, I'd actually describe her as sort of a private lady.

AR

She seems like she has a very strong interior.



Installation view of *After the fire is gone*, 2017. Images courtesy of the artist and Microscope Gallery

CG

A very private, impenetrable interior. Throughout the film there are glimpses into her private life, usually in the music videos where she's singing against these backdrops and interacting with these sculptures I've made that are immovable. They don't talk back or have any agency within the film. They're these very still, stoic, kind of ridiculous objects that she reveals herself to. They're un-emotive where she's being very emotive. The only glimpses we get of what she really feels are through these sculptural music video scenes.

AR

How would you describe her relationship to the sculptures in those scenes? What is she using them for?

CG

They are stand-ins, in a way, for what in a normal movie might be "real" characters. But real characters can talk and interact and engage. The point is these objects can't engage with Dolly, so they serve the function of a safe audience to whom she can express herself. They're these

nonjudgmental forms she can open up to that are incapable of discourse.

I often use tropes that reference cinema or TV or pop culture, and, in a way, the sculptures also become tropes. They stand in for things or people that are familiar to us in terms of the narrative, like a regular customer at the diner, for instance. Dolly's interaction with a sculpture of the customer isn't a whole lot different than her interaction with the real person. Her interactions with the sculptures really drive home how isolated she is.

AR

I totally see that. Speaking of pop culture, obviously with the name Dolly Presley, we get immediate references, but your film has a strong relationship to music as well. How did that come to play such a large part in the piece?

CG

Well, you can't have a piece where the main character's name is Dolly Presley without having a strong relationship to country music. I approached the music like, I'm going to take this song and make my version of it—it's about doing it yourself or creating ownership. It's one thing to lip-sync to a song, but I've done these re-recordings of them, and besides it being integral to Dolly as a character, I also just want to do it myself and live in a certain way. I distance it from the source material because if it's exactly a Dolly Parton or an Elvis song or whatever, then it becomes too much about who does the songs. By distorting them and doing the recordings, they become Dolly Presley's.

This also ties back to the sculptures. I'm making recreations of things we're familiar with, but I'm making them my own. I'm like, No, it's going to be my cow, my version of a cow, and Dolly's version of a cow. And this fits the insular feeling of the project, the installation of the film.

The music videos in particular had to feel very internal—they are basically the only glimpses the film offers into Dolly's head. I chose the songs as a straight-up attempt at narration. "Here You Come Again" was a way to show how much Clayton, Dolly's long-lost love, means to her without her having to verbalize it (something she would never do). "Just Someone I Used to Know" is a Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner duet—it talks about the agony of things changing, how brutal that is, and the aftermath of loving somebody and it not working out. The last song I use is an old one that everybody covers, "Precious Memories." I couldn't find a good karaoke version on YouTube, so I borrowed a cheap electric organ and did this very simple recording in my studio. The rest of them I basically sang over a karaoke track in my friend Jane Cramer's recording room/closet (in my underwear because it was really hot in there).

The music videos allowed me to talk about love and longing in a direct way—using songs that already exist as an outlet for Dolly to show that she has more going on inside her than what meets the eye and that her internal world is weird, complicated, and painful.

AR

Even though there's definitely a level of distancing between your covers and the originals, it feels like you have a genuine affection for these songs.

CG

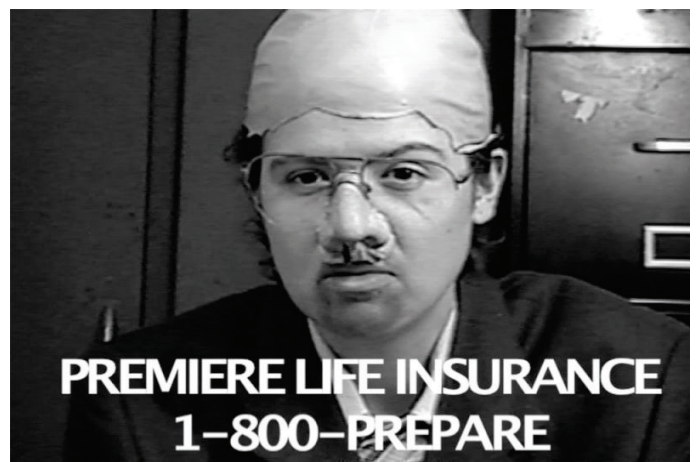
Oh, absolutely. I grew up with them in northern Florida. My granny would listen to country music every night on her five-disc CD changer, which she constantly had to call someone over to figure out how to use.

AR

I think affection is important for any manifestation of camp—it can come off as derisive, but there's always an ambivalence.

CG

There's no denying the elements of camp throughout my work. But in order for the humor in camp to read, there also has to be sincere engagement with the subject matter. If it was all satire, all a joke, there would be no emotional resonance.



Stills from *After the fire in gone*, 2017.

When I'm shooting and when I'm building the objects, I have no concept that what I'm doing is funny. I understand the humor in retrospect, when I watch clips and see the relationship to the sculptures, but when I'm working, I'm not intentionally trying to be funny. A lot of what makes it funny is the juxtaposition of everything, especially in relation to costumes. In one scene, Dolly's husband, Anton, comes home and complains about his dinner. It's a really trivial thing. Dolly's chopping vegetables. He comes in, complains about what kind of pasta she's using, and that's it. And it wouldn't be funny, but I'm wearing a fake nose. There are these distancing mechanisms throughout the film, whether it be sculpture or costume or the use of narrative tropes. Those elements make it funny. There's a grotesque nature to it. And there's horror as well. Camp can oftentimes be really horrifying. But it's palatable because there's humor, and there's a subversion of the narrative in that I'm singing to a cow. (laughter) Or I'm getting out of a papier-mâché taxi in the middle of Bushwick. Those things offset the depression of it.

AR

I find one of the scenes in the film quite disturbing, the sex scene. Maybe even more so because what's happening around it is so funny.

CG

Right. The sex scene is one of the most classic scenes—I mean, other than the fact that I'm wearing a bra that looks like boobs. There are no sculptures in that scene, and it's kind of a classic rendezvous. It's familiar in terms of what we're used to seeing in cinema and in narrative. You know, I wouldn't actually call it a sex scene first of all. It's pretty PG. PG-13 maybe. But what's horrible about it is that I play both characters, so there's an inherent offness even though you're watching something that is technically familiar. It's this "I can't do this" moment and then she leaves. We've seen that a million times, but its offness is in the costume, in the setup, and in the fact that I'm having this really intimate, kind of gross, scary, intense moment with another character who is also me.

AR

I'm still convinced there's something scary and perverse about it beyond just both characters being you. The angles perhaps?

CG

One thing I notice making it kind of perverse is that the light is on.

AR

It's really on.

CG

It's so bright in there.

AR

Also, your playing of Clayton is very masculine in that scene. How you've angled the shot where he's on top feels potentially threatening when we realize Dolly is starting to change her mind.

CG

This scene was shot four different times because I never got it right. I kept renting the same hotel room, and I think they were convinced we were up to no good.

AR

(laughter) Where was this?

CG

The Hotel Penn in midtown. It's very cheap. We kept going back. And I had various body doubles, both male and female, trying to get these angles. You can't show the double's face, and it was complicated to shoot, so a lot of the distortion you're talking about happened by accident. But I agree, there's almost a real sickness to that scene. I wanted it to feel desperate. Two people

going for something that they know isn't going to work and not letting go of something that used to be, something that maybe wasn't real anyway.

AR

For me, a huge part of the grotesqueness is in the costumes. They have a prosthetic quality.

CG

Costumes, for me, are very much about gesture. Anton has a bald cap with a Sharpie line and a fake nose that's held on by glasses that I took the lenses out of. You get the idea: he's an insurance salesman. He's in this really ill-fitting suit. To me, the "worse" the costuming is, the more I'm into it. I'm not going to spend time blending the bald cap into my forehead because it's just not about convincing someone that I physically look like this character. It's more about, No, no, I'm not that character. You can see the artifice. You can see that it's fake. This ties back to the sculptures—it's like, You get the idea. It's a chicken. In the same way, with the costumes, it's like, You get the idea. Clayton's the leading man. He's wearing a mustache. He has a hat on. Maybe you can see the tape holding that mustache on, but it's not about that. It's gestural in the same way the sculptures are.

AR

I like that you keep phrasing it as, "You get the idea." It gives a lot of credit to the audience and assumes they're in on things.

CG

I'm asking you to suspend your disbelief. I mean, the main character is wearing an Elvis suit with a Marie Antoinette wig and sideburns and she's working in a diner! It makes no sense. There's an inherent fakeness I'm asking you to participate in as soon as you enter the space or start watching the movie. I don't want it to be real. I want it to be not real in the same way that nothing is real. TV is such an artifice anyway; media is so fake. I don't think my films are any more fake than what we see already. I'm just more up-front about it.

AR

Yes, there's a fake quality to them, but I feel a sense of empathy and relation with Dolly. I feel like her feelings are real.

CG

Yeah, totally. With Dolly, I played it like an everywoman.

AR

Right, but there are also traces of her that remind me of women in melodramas, in terms of the downtrodden, shit-upon woman who gets a new chance at romance.

CG

Totally. It's weird becoming her. I mean, I am her. I play her. I made her up. (laughter) I've created this character and I empathize with her. It's obviously coming from this very deep place inside of me. She doesn't really have a good option in the movie. She's either going to be with Anton, her insurance salesman husband who berates her for using linguini instead of vermicelli. Or she can go with Clayton, her mustachioed former flame who comes up from Louisiana in this totally unfair way. He barges into her place of work and expects her to just drop everything she's doing and come back to him. Even though you want to root for Clayton within the context of the narrative, he's actually not a good option either. But ultimately, I think she's way more in control than she knows. I'm playing the other characters, so she's controlling the whole thing, this whole circuitous narrative, though she's not aware of it. She's engaging in this really sincere way, and I'm doing the same thing as the maker of the movie.

AR

Something we haven't talked about is your interest in food.

CG

(laughter) How astute of you. Yeah.

AR

There are a lot of domestic scenes. Food is Dolly's job.

CG

The food I'm choosing to represent is very iconic, these classic symbols of Americana. I'm making a sculpture of a grilled cheese sandwich, of foods that are visual indicators of this overarching culture that my work always deals with. It's weird, I've never thought about it so directly. I love food. I'm a food person and gravitate toward using it in movies. There are always references to food. In one of my films, *Species* (2008), there's attention drawn to this huge fish.

AR

You seem to like to work with the constraints of genre, and I'm curious about what that offers you.

CG

The word constraints is really useful in relation to genre. Not all of my work necessarily fits into genre, but there are elements of genre throughout. My film *Heritage* (2012) is a Western. This film, *After the fire is gone*, plays off of daytime TV or a traditional melodramatic love triangle. Constraints are really important because they give you rules to break. When you follow them, everyone knows what to expect, and then when you break them, you have this psychological departure that people don't expect.

AR

We talked about how the sculptures function within the videos, but do you feel like once they're taken out and put in an exhibition, they take on a different value?

CG

Yeah, I think they have to. I usually start by making a sculpture, and then I contextualize it within a video. When a sculpture appears in a video, it serves a purpose, but when you take it out of that context and put it on display, the sculpture has to do much more than just be a chicken or a hamburger. It has to hold its own as an object in the space. With this project, the sculptures you see in the video are often not the sculptures in the exhibition space. I remade most of them. I made two new cows. The chickens in the video look like clunky turkeys or something. I wasn't interested in them as sculptures at that point. I just needed something to serve a function in the video. For the show, I got invested in the objects in a much deeper way. In order for them to be successful as an installation, you have to feel my interest in everything. So I went back in and added details. I wanted them to hold their own and not just be props.

AR

It's interesting, though, because then you fashion them largely as sets.

CG

You mean in terms of how they're installed in the exhibition?

AR

Yeah. I become more aware of how sculptural these sets are and how prop-like or character-like the sculptures are.

CG

Right. It's a relationship I'm constantly navigating and defining. Can they be both? I think the answer is yes. And when they're all together in the installation, they do something else entirely. You can walk around the space and it changes. If you're standing in the diner set looking at the taxi set, it does something totally different.

AR

That's part of what makes your work so successfully interdisciplinary—you have a profound knowledge of what filmic media does and the sculpture is not an afterthought. The two mediums are equally contending with each other.

CG

Making sculptures is almost the easiest part. Shooting the scenes is also fun, but it's much more tedious. I try to make it look like the performances are really loose, and they are to an extent, but they're pretty laborious to film, playing all the characters and using body doubles. Shooting turns into this geometry equation because you can only have people standing in certain places. The camera can only be in two or three positions; otherwise I'd reveal it's a body double. Sometimes that gets revealed anyway, like the double has a very hairy arm. (laughter)

Starting off by making the sculptures helps me think. I'm not a verbal person, so when I'm doing something with my hands I can be really intuitive. I'm almost planning out the movie while I'm making the sculptures.

AR

They become like a storyboard.

CG

Yeah, and I work them into the narrative. I can't separate sculpture from video. They're codependent. I couldn't think of any of this stuff if I didn't make sculptures. And I try not to judge what I'm building. I just try to find context for it. I might start off with a chicken, make fifteen more, and then these chickens need a cow. And that cow needs this ... I think in this really elemental, literal way. Sometimes I'm like, Can't you be a little more abstract?

AR

Tell me if it surprises you to hear this—I'm actually quite invested in the romance that's going on.

CG

You mean the romance between Dolly and Clayton?

AR

Yeah, or what's going to happen with them.

CG

That's a relief to hear. It means the mechanisms I'm using are working. And that's where the artifice comes into play because I'm using the classic love triangle trope, and if I'm not successful in appropriating that, it falls flat. I'm glad you're invested in the love triangle that I've created with myself. Me and me and me.

AR

I'm curious about your interest in how we construct romance within media.

CG

The romance I've constructed is one between very heightened versions of masculinity and femininity. Dolly Presley could be a gender-ambiguous character, and maybe was originally, but she became distinctly feminine as the project evolved. Clayton doesn't say much, tapping into what you would expect of "the strong silent type." The way romance plays out in this film is rooted to their respective portrayals of gender and how they're expected to act.

They also just, like, love each other. (laughter) You can analyze it in the way that I just did—definitely there is some complexity to it—but basically, you know, they are in love. And they can't be together. That's the narrative: they're in love, and you can feel it. She doesn't love her husband, and you can feel that, too. There's a deep sadness to that. Ultimately, there's a lot in this piece about the choices we make and where the chips fall in a very pure and simple yet complicated way.

AR

Are you interested in the soap opera form?

CG

I'm not going to claim I'm someone who never misses an episode of Days of Our Lives, but what I love about soap operas and what I stole from them for this project is the compression. In a movie, it takes two hours for all this drama to unfold, but in a soap opera, all of this stuff happens in twenty minutes. My movie is thirty minutes. You don't need all that other stuff; you just need what you need. There are highs and lows, and it progresses really fast, but it doesn't feel rushed. That's the marvel of what a soap opera can do. My film also looks like soap opera because I'm shooting on VHS—so it has a lo-res broadcast feel that is pretty referential of daytime TV. I wanted the video quality to feel dated.

AR

So now that you're wrapping this project, what are you looking toward? What's going to help you not miss After the fire is gone?

CG

Oh, there's definitely a postpartum type of vibe going on. This project has been my main focus for the past several years. It's been a big push to figure this out. I want to take a bit of a break and maybe, I don't know, read a little. But I have something that I'm excited to start working on. As of right now, I'm going to play Lee Harvey Oswald. But my projects tend to change pretty radically throughout the course of making them. So I'm hesitant to say. It might start off with Oswald, and then I might end up playing—

AR

—JFK.

CG

Well—(laughter)—that's sort of in the works already.

Bomb - 09 Janvier 2018
Interview / Art
Cate Giordano by Amy Ruhl

GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegailard.com