

# GAVLAK

Doug Harvey, "Spiritual Revival: Marnie Weber Casts A Perverse Spell," Blouin Modern Painters,  
October/November 2016

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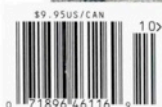


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**Marnie Weber**

A production still from *The Day of Forevermore*, 2016. HD video, 16 mm and Super 8, 84 min. 50 sec.



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*Spiritual*  
**REVIVAL**

MARNIE  
WEBER CASTS  
A PERVERSE  
SPELL

**By Doug Harvey**

LEE ANN NICKEL

Marnie Weber  
in her Los Angeles  
studio, 2015.

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"Try it again without the death metal voice, Doug!" I'm inside a bulky latex ram-horned devil mask, wearing a swanky maroon dinner jacket and cravat, tending bar for a coven of witches in a ruinous hut in a crumbling bohemian compound in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, and Lee Lynch is getting sarcastic. Five hours earlier I'd caught a ride with my bandmate, the sculptor Daniel Hawkins, up the winding precipitous incline to the Zorthian Ranch, a definitively unfinished art environment dating from the antebellum heyday of West Coast Assemblage. Daniel was multitasking various production duties on artist Marnie Weber's first full-length feature film, for which I'd been recruited to do a cameo.

But Lee is directing the scene, and he doesn't like my guttural *Exorcist* croak. The witches weigh in and we settle on something that sounds more like a cartoon bear to me—but tensions are already high, and these guys are the professionals, right? Besides, Marnie's no stranger to cartoon bears. I can't quite understand what set everyone on edge—something about the electricians not getting pizza? But there's a definite schism between the CalArts film school alum—represented by Lee—and the movie industry tech guys that Marnie's brought on board for *The Day of Forevermore*.

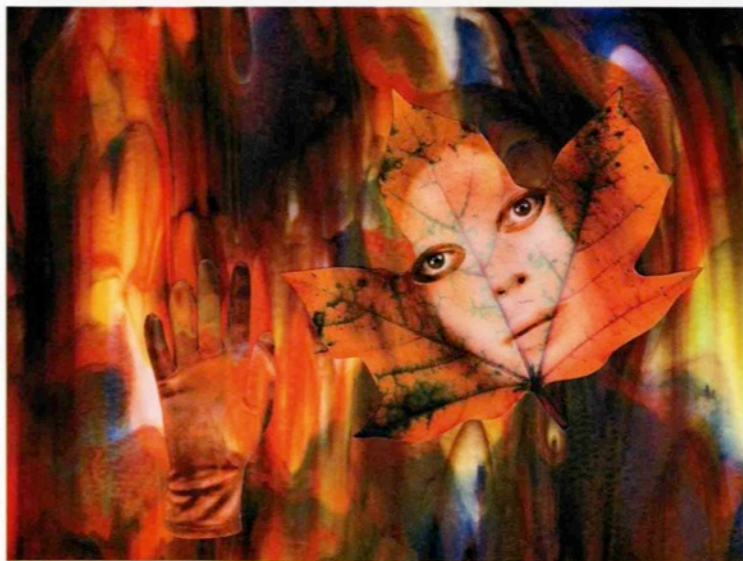
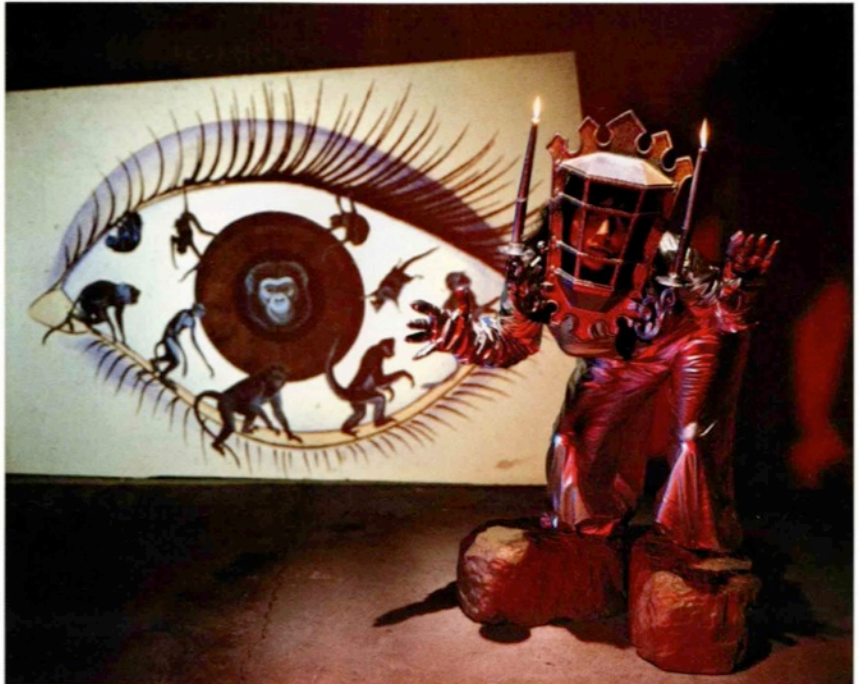
The film, which had its North American debut in September in Los Angeles, is Marnie's 22nd, but her first to break the 80-minute barrier, and the first to take full advantage of the considerable resources that Hollywood has to offer. It is in some sense the culmination of a developmental cinematic arc that mirrors Marnie's wider multimedia practice, as well as the history of film—not to mention the art world's transformation in scale and spectacularity over the last couple of decades.

Marnie's first films were made with handheld silent Super 8 cameras in the early '90s. They were a direct outgrowth of her solo rock-theatrical performance art—itsself a mutation of her involvement in the industrial DIY milieu of postpunk Los Angeles with her first band, Party Boys. As subsequent movies grew more ambitious and sophisticated, they—in combination with her collages, sculptures, and installations—began to portray a coherent (if fantastical) mythological realm, populated by wounded animals, seedy hobo clowns, ghosts, goblins, tree spirits, possessed ventriloquist dummies and, yes, cartoon bears.

These neo-archetypal entities usually function as support characters to a strong central female lead, played by Marnie. For

FROM TOP:  
Performance production still from  
*The Eye Prison*, 1994.

*Autumn Greeting*, 2016. Mixed-media  
collage and acrylic on archival  
pigment print, 18 x 24 in.



BOTH IMAGES: MARNIE WEBER AND GAVLAK LOS ANGELES

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*Night Whispers*, 2016. Mixed-media collage and acrylic on panel, 66 x 36 in.

**Wounded animals, seedy hobo clowns, ghosts, goblins, tree spirits, cartoon bears...**

most of the last decade her character was consistent: the leader of a gaggle of starstruck adolescent ghosts dubbed the Spirit Girls. Dressed in identical nightgowns, long straight wigs, and chillingly blank porcelain-white masks (and incorporating the acting skills and instrumental chops of Dani Tull, Tanya Haden, and a cluster of other gifted musicians), the Spirit Girls became an actual rock band and developed a considerable cult following.

The Spirit Girls' exploits stretched over four loosely interwoven films, also manifesting in gallery exhibits, elaborate performances and *Forever Free*—an accomplished album informed as much by Marnie's teen glam and prog influences as her postpunk roots. But as the aughts wound down, the band seemed to have dealt with that unfinished business which binds the departed to our shores—the eternally adolescent Spirit Girls had found rock-and-roll glory in the performative afterlife—and Marnie began casting about for a new perspective, and a new cast of characters.

In November 2010, she staged an exorcism of sorts. Under the auspices of West of Rome Public Art's free-floating "Women in the City" series, Marnie organized a final Spirit Girls performance at the Altadena Mountain View Cemetery and Mausoleum. The audience was greeted by a procession of monsters, cemetery tours led by an ancient, addled gravedigger, and the debut of Marnie's film *The Eternal Heart*, screened in the opulently appointed Gothic Mausoleum. Pointedly, the Spirit Girls did not appear in the film itself, but provided a live soundtrack, followed by a farewell romp through their greatest hits.

It was a spectacular event that is still spoken of as a high point in recent L.A. performance history. But overlooked by

MARNIE WEBER AND GAVLAK LOS ANGELES

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**Zorthian Ranch  
and its  
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are quintessential  
L.A. art  
historical  
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simultaneously  
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LEANN NICKEL

many of the opening night revelers was the fact that the Mausoleum was also hosting an exhibit of Marnie's new collages—harkening back to the early cut-and-paste bodies of work from her first forays into the art world—in its unlikely and hard-to-find art gallery. "Eternity Forever" ended up being her last hometown solo show until her current outing at Gavlak Los Angeles, on view through November 5. But the venue proved serendipitous for a completely different reason—the show that was coming down while Marnie was installing hers.

"That's how I found out about the

ranch," Marnie remembered during a recent studio visit, "because Zorthian had the show up right before me. I remember him from when I worked at Otis College of Art and Design, because he would always come to the shows. And I always loved his artwork. Then when I was looking for a place to shoot *The Day of Forevermore*—I was looking at this ranch up in Palmdale, but I couldn't figure out logistically how to get all the people over there, and I'd have to rent hotel rooms. Someone from the Mausoleum said, 'You should try the Zorthian Ranch, I hear they're starting to

Caroline Zorthian as Dirty Bunny, emerging from the outhouse in a still from *The Day of Forevermore*, 2016. HD video, 16 mm, and Super 8, 84 min. 50 sec.

let people shoot movies there..."

Perhaps a bit of explanation is in order. Zorthian Ranch and its erstwhile proprietor are quintessential L.A. art historical phenomena—simultaneously legendary and unknown. A refugee from the 1920s Armenian Genocide, Jirayr Zorthian got a degree in fine arts from Yale, made murals for the Works Progress Administration,

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served in Army Intelligence during World War II, married a shaving cream heiress from New Orleans, and moved to Altadena to live slightly off the grid and experiment with urban homesteading.

On a parcel that would grow to 45 acres, Zorthian raised his own crops and livestock (including pigs, bees, and horses) and began to amass architectural fragments, old cars and trucks, construction debris, discarded telephone poles and railway ties—anything that could be salvaged and reconfigured into what—if not for the man's Ivy League and East Coast bona fides—could be categorized as an Outsider Architecture masterpiece.

Declaring it "The Center for Research and Development of Industrial Discards with Emphasis on Aesthetics," Zorthian cobbled together over a dozen idiosyncratic municipal code-defying structures connected

by wonkily imagineered roads, walkways, and bridges. Some of these facilities were rented out to kindred spirits, but that was only the tip of the relational iceberg.

Zorthian Ranch became a hub for bohemian bacchanals—literally so in the artist's later years, when he would host an annual Primavera festival dressed in red longjohns and a toga as "Zor-Bacchus"—attended by buxom wood nymphs and dispensing wine, roast pig, and carte blanche permission to freak freely. Charlie Parker led a legendary naked all-night jam there a couple of years before he died, and randy CalTech Nobel physicist Richard Feynman practically lived there. Every summer for 25 years, Zorthian and his second wife Dabney ran an anarchic arts camp for kids.

Zorthian himself continued producing more conventional artworks—he could never

manage to turn his back on the glory of the human figure—but wasn't able to maintain a real foothold in the L.A. art world, particularly after the Assemblage moment gave way to the cooler visions of the Ferus Gallery mob. Zorthian was too much of a character for his own good, and when he died in 2004 at the age of 92, he left a cumbersome and shambolic legacy for his children to sort out.

Back to Marnie: "When we were shooting the movie, I was telling Zorthian's daughter Caroline (she actually plays the bunny that comes out of the outhouse covered in poop) the concept: how the daughter, the young

A still from *The Day of Forevermore*, showing Hookah George (Michael G. Schmidt) lounging in the Drug Den.

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witch, inherits this huge legacy of a ranch and all of the burdens and responsibilities. But it's such a magnificent place that she doesn't really want to leave it—so she's deeply conflicted. And Caroline says, "It sounds like the story of my life."

The story of Marnie's life too. In spite of the uncanny geomancy inscribing its narrative onto the Zorthian landscape, *The Day of Forevermore* is at heart a layered autobiographical myth, with a perverse generational twist. The story follows a young witch, Luna Crimson—played by Colette Weber Shaw, Marnie's teenage daughter with longtime partner Jim Shaw—as she struggles with growing demands that she take over the mantle of coven leadership and dreams of escaping Forevermore Acres, whose shabby junk-strewn confines she has never left. A group of normal human teens sneak onto the property, and antics ensue.

I questioned Marnie about casting herself

as Baba Muthra—the demented, alcoholic, scheming 800-year-old mother witch—opposite her real-life daughter. "I think it's more like she's playing me," she laughs, "and I'm playing my mother. My mother wasn't that extreme, but I had to give her a little bit of characterization. She wasn't an alcoholic, but a lot of my friends' mothers in the '70s were—severely. So I started thinking about mothers of my time versus mothers of today. All of Colette's friends' moms are fully together: careers, no drugs or alcohol or psychological abuse. Everyone's all concerned about their kids' feelings. I had a friend's mother who was always drunk and getting beat up by the father. Another mother always provided us with our pot. It was a different era. So Baba is kind of the product of that '70s motherhood, and Colette's like an amalgamation of my character in the *Spirit Girls* and myself when I was younger."

It's not hard to see Luna's journey as paralleling Marnie's relationship to the art world as well—the dreamy symbolism of the work lends itself to repeated incidents of acausal connectivity—with Zorthian Ranch/Forevermore Acres standing in for the culture plantation on which we fine-art types toil. Marnie's father, a noted art historian and frustrated painter, had always wanted her to go into art—so, of course, she became a punk musician. But the inexorable pull of her paternal legacy drew her in through a side gate, and enfolded her. The rest is contemporary art history.

When I first heard of Marnie's plan to go all Hollywood with *Forevermore*, I worried that her work would be adulterated by that

A still from *The Day of Forevermore*, in which the Witches and the Devil devise a plan for Forevermore Acres.

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world's tendency toward slick homogeneity. Happily, the new film retains the collage aesthetic that gives Marnie's oeuvre its distinctive postmodern tessellation.

Shot in a half dozen formats, from iPhone to 16 mm film, and veering from exquisitely composed mise en scène to absurdist monologues to relatively straightforward storytelling to avant-garde abstraction, *Forevermore* offers a comprehensive pastiche of Marnie's narrative obsessions and visual motifs, providing both closure and a way forward after the Spirit Girls' dissolution.

*Forevermore* ends ambiguously—Luna seems to simultaneously shoulder her dynastic burden and escape into the outside world. Marnie's latest gallery show—her first with Gavlak Los Angeles—functions as a sort of sequel to the film. "I thought, What would Luna find when she wandered off through a fence and across a field?" recounts Marnie, "and then I thought: a pagan chapel!"

Marnie's "Chapel of the Moon" is one of the most unabashedly sumptuous shows of her career. A soothing, meditative environment splitting the difference between baroque opulence and the New Age, it incorporates a soundtrack, theatrical lighting, sculpture, collage, and video to create a poetically charged sanctuary. Shards of stained glass appear as leaves on weeping willow sculptures and—scanned,

printed, and cut up—as components in a series of big new collages depicting iconic Pagan entities: an owl, a fire angel, a satyr.

Two feast poles constructed from the stacked heads of the monsters and witches from *Forevermore* add a darker note, as do the creepy life-size figures of my own Devil Bartender ("You've been immortalized!" says Marnie) and the Melancholy Pig. I'm reminded of Duchamp's otherworldly *Etants Donnés*—not least by the decidedly retinal video loop of a waterfall. But the overall feeling is one of a sweet and timeless refuge, as at the end of a long journey.

After the 2010 Mausoleum show, Marnie thought—not for the first or last time—that

**"What would Luna find when she wandered off through a fence and across a field? A pagan chapel!"**

A production still from *The Day of Forevermore*, in which Luna (Colette Weber Shaw) scolds the Eggman for not attempting to fly.

she might be through with exhibitions and such. But a flurry of activities—the noise band F (with Daniel Hawkins and myself), a survey show at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Geneva (where *Forevermore* had its only previous screening), and a ginormous installation in Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory—makes for a powerful demonstration of the principle "easier said than done."

With the release of *Forevermore* and this haven-like resting place of a show, it feels like Marnie may have reached a point of simultaneous escape from and reconciliation with her bumbling, wounded inner menagerie. But she's not pushing the eject button, just the reset. "I can never top the scale of *Forevermore*," she asserts. "So I'm just going back to the beginning. Just me and the camera. Before it was Jim and me and the camera. But now I'm thinking of just setting it up on a tripod. I had this idea I thought was really funny. Maybe I'm an artist working on something, and everywhere I go there's a monkey following me around belittling me for an hour and a half." She laughs. "I think that would be the perfect next movie!" MP