

## ADRIANA FARMIGA

BY CLYDE NICHOLS

Index

Marisa Newman Projects  
September 4–October 30, 2024  
New York

I'm sitting cross-legged on the bright pink floor of Adriana Farmiga's *Index*, at Marisa Newman Projects. The installation contains a large set of marine-plywood cut forms resting atop the pink paint that coats the floor and the lower part of the walls. What first seems to be an indecipherable jumble of playful, curvilinear forms soon resolves into a series of human-scale, upturned emoji masks with openings cut for oversized eyes and popsicle stick supports pitched at incline angles.

From my vantage point, humorous combinations quickly emerge: a skull obscures a cat; a lion peeks out from behind a ghost; the Statue of Liberty leans against Mickey Mouse while an otter blockades them all into a corner. Caught between play and sociopolitical dissent, the sculptures by Farmiga evoke the craft masks of childhood as much as discarded protest posters.

Initial impressions of the work include soaring reproaches of the faceless avatars we create online, more pointedly how

often we mask ourselves, and what we lose when we exist behind layers of abstraction. But, opposing this clarity is a tension—between the pink and the blankness, between passivity and potential—that never fully resolves.

The unsettling simplicity of the masks makes them feel more like shields than symbols. Between the laminated layers of birch plywood; the organic fights the machine, public contends with the private, protest meets passivity, and obfuscation confronts visibility. As Sianne Ngai outlines in her prophetic essay "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," artists who successfully activate the subversive potential of "cuteness" often co-opt postwar aesthetics of powerlessness to transform the infantilized into the uncanny. Much of the labor involved in Farmiga's installation seems aimed at achieving this defamiliarization. In the works' unpainted, hollow state, the emojis are stripped of their once steadfast cuteness and become perversely appealing agents of interrogation, reevaluation, and threat.

As the American-born child of Ukrainian refugees who fled starvation, assassination, and the war-torn displacement camps of Eastern Europe, Farmiga built a world around digesting opposing cultures from an early age. Perhaps this heritage helps explain her deftness for reconstitution? It certainly offers an

ideological bridge to guide the work into the self-consumptive lineage where it belongs: anthropophagy. *Index* riffs upon the strategies of practitioners like Lygia Clark and Tarsila do Amaral as it cannibalizes formal complexity and popular symbology to physiologically regurgitate the viewer.

The "Baker-Miller pink" that Farmiga used to paint the floor and walls was originally deployed in the 1980s across prisons and mental institutions to sedate restless populations. When this history combined with the horizontal, painted boundary that recalls artist Ryan Gander's theory of the "passivity line," I found myself surprisingly disarmed. As if the seductive pull I had felt towards the ground was the result of an invisible, yet crushing weight of the Pepto-Bismol pink flood waters around me—as if the masks had already been partially digested and rounded by the corrosive forces of the vitriol that circumambulates the web.

Yearning for a "key" to the swirling index ahead of me, I turn toward the back room of the gallery to find an intimate set of three still-life watercolors titled: *Inventory (Red)*, *Inventory (Yellow)*, and *Inventory (Blue)*. In each work, seven objects are rendered in meticulous detail. These include a cocktail umbrella, a gingham napkin, an injection molded plastic dustpan, and a bottle of perfume, among

many others. As the only piece in the show that dares cross the pink border, I first understand the works to be a tangential respite from the psychological demands of the main installation. But in typical Farmiga fashion, the underlying point/counterpoint logic is undeniable. These works confound the viewer's already disoriented understanding against maddeningly unambiguous objects. They are whimsical, grouped by color and resolved to painstaking clarity.

While much of Farmiga's previous work has pinpointed tenderness and humor in the realm of assemblage, this exhibition is emblematic of a deepened trust in her abilities as both a facilitator and instigator. Ultimately the show's strength is its ability to wager jubilation against a prescient warning: the liberal pacification that has shifted violence from the physical world into online realms is far from innocuous. In this digital dystopia, cute emojis become stand-ins for complex political debate; round forms and calming colors attract attention but conceal unseen violence; and consumerist detritus is compressed into a flattened form. In an index there should be no east or west, no foes to conquer, and certainly no moralizing judgements to be made.

Clyde Nichols is a New York City based artist, writer, and recent graduate from The Cooper Union.

## JASON RHOADES

BY SAUL OSTROW

Drive II

Hauser & Wirth  
September 5–October 19, 2024  
New York

Jason Rhoades (1965–2006) is best known for creating immersive, provocative installations that engaged with contemporary social and political issues, both local and global. His works are an embodiment of the concept that all art is inherently a social practice. They function as spaces for cultural critique, audience participation, and the challenging of cultural norms, making them deeply political despite the fact that they do not conform to traditional notions of political art. That Rhoades is able to do this without resorting to didacticism or overt messaging sets his work apart from many of his contemporaries. The scary part of Rhoades's works is that although they are a product of the 1990s and early-2000s LA art scene, they seem neither dated nor anachronistic today—the mixture of historical and contemporary global and regional themes Rhoades probed seems not to have significantly shifted since then.

*DRIVE II*, currently on view at Hauser & Wirth, can be read as a nuanced and complex commentary on art, consumerism, and personal mythology. Cars are its principal referent. The cars that make up *DRIVE II* were all owned, used, and

modified by Rhoades, but in no dramatic manner. Rhoades's selection of vehicles reflects a keen understanding of how cars function as cultural signifiers and markers of social stratification. There are five cars in all. The inclusion of American mass-market cars such as a Chevrolet Caprice and an Impala speaks to the central role automobiles play in middle-class American culture. Interestingly, among his fleet of cars, there is neither a muscle car (an American-made sports coupe with a powerful engine) nor a pickup truck, both of which are often associated with masculinity and gendered power dynamics.

By acquiring vehicles with previous lives (e.g., the Caprice had been a police car), Rhoades incorporated their larger narratives into his work. Each car comes with an anecdote supplied by wall text that explains how it came into Rhoades's possession or how it was used or modified by him. In one case, he adds a Ferrari sticker onto the front of the American-made Fiero, a wanna-be European-styled sports car manufactured by Pontiac. In another, we find a dreamcatcher hanging from the rear-view mirror of the Impala along with a few inconsequential possessions left behind—this car Rhoades encouraged other artists to borrow so as to increase its aura. As for the Caprice, it was enough to preserve the residual markings of its previous life as a police car. The most unfamiliar car included here is a Ligier microcar. These are typically very small, with two seats, and are known as "cars without a license." For his Ligier, Rhoades reversed the front seat so he could have



Installation view: Jason Rhoades: *DRIVE II*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, 2024. © The Estate of Jason Rhoades. Courtesy the Estate of Jason Rhoades and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

face-to-face conversations with his passenger. Given these aesthetic and anecdotal enhancements, all of these cars now function as assisted readymades—that is, as sculptures. In the case of the Ferrari, Rhoades's trophy car, he had "traded up" the Caprice sculpture, which as an artwork had attained the value of the Ferrari, which Rhoades ironically viewed as a sign of his own success, if not that of his work.

By using cars as readymades and infusing them with personal anecdotes, Rhoades creates a multi-layered commentary on the intersection of art, culture, consumerism, and identity. This reading is reinforced by the inclusion of the assemblage *Fucking Picabia Cars with Ejection Seat* in the show. Created in 1997 and 2000, this work is assembled from aluminum poles, plywood silhouettes, plastic buckets, pornographic images, and other materials. The sculpture, inspired by Picabia's fascination with cars (in his case,

Bugattis), exemplifies Rhoades's ability to create provocative, multi-layered works that engage with complex cultural realities. The piece features a pair of automotive silhouettes that appear conjoined and suspended high in the air. The inclusion of an "ejection seat" and the suspended nature of the piece dramatize the precarious nature of sexual prowess, status, and power associated with ownership. This sculpture in particular made me realize the connection between Rhoades's work in general and that of Robert Rauschenberg, whose "Combines" also, in an encoded way, comment on social and political issues.

Also included at Hauser & Wirth is a video featuring Rhoades driving around Los Angeles in 1998 while being interviewed by curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. In this "performance" Rhoades fervently expounds on his ideas about cars and their role in his art. He discusses how driving in



LA provides extended time for the mind to wander and how being in a car gives one a sense of control over climate, entertainment, and power. He explains the relationship between cars and his art, equating parking with situating a sculpture. He also explores cars as icons of art history and symbols of aspiration and class. The radio is tuned to Power 106 FM, adding a hip-hop soundtrack to the drive.

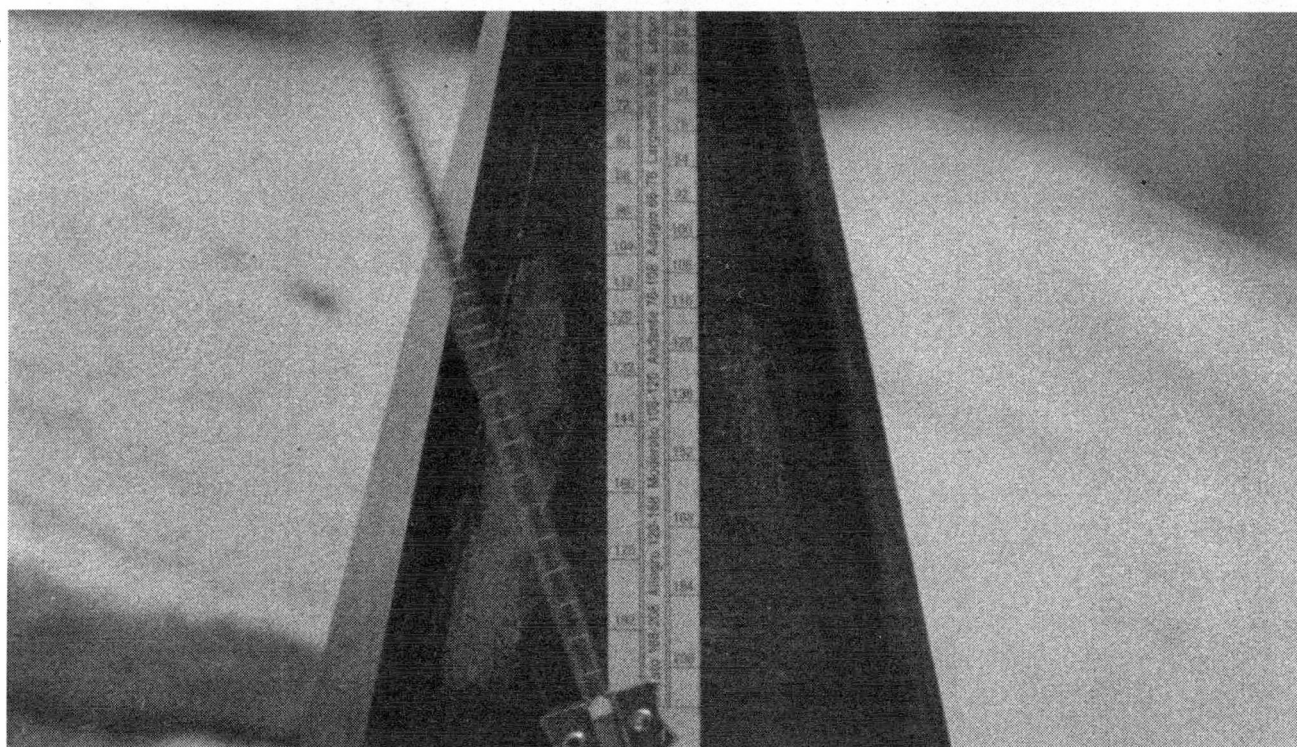
Because it is devoid of the spectacle usually associated with his installations, the effectiveness of *DRIVE II* is found in how, in the most subtle manner, it exemplifies Rhoades's approach to the intersection of art, the everyday life of the viewer, and that of the artist. This exhibition reflects how his multifaceted approach to art-making and cultural critique differs from many of his nineties peers such as Tom Sachs or Jenny Holzer. Like them, Rhoades uses

everyday objects as a medium for social commentary, but he differs by combining his critique with personal narrative. The result is that his work simultaneously addresses such themes as identity, status, consumerism, and materialism in American society, while the overwhelming nature of Rhoades's sculptures and installations reflects the saturation of information and stimuli in modern society. Given this mash-up, Rhoades's work is

less focused on immediate public reaction, recognition, or controversy, but instead on prompting his audience to examine their own—as well as his—relationship to these cultural and social issues.

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Mark Armijo McKnight, *Without a Song (solo ii)*, 2024. 16mm film transferred to video, black and white, sound, 11:19 minutes. Courtesy the artist. © Mark Armijo McKnight.



## MARK ARMIJO MCKNIGHT

BY ZACH RITTER

*Decreation*

Whitney Museum of American Art  
August 24, 2024–January 5, 2025  
New York

The American West has been photographed so extensively and for so long that to say our collective idea of it is inseparable from those images, or that, for those who have never been there, that landscape *is* an image, seems less an exaggeration than an acknowledgement of historical circumstance. What that image has often shown us, at least the one that has been created through photography, has been nature seen and understood, controlled even, before then being remade in our image and by our processes of industry, commerce, and habitation. The American West has been both subject and reflection; it has been the ground upon which the American settler-colonial project has unfolded, and also, crucially, an idea (of limitlessness, of the frontier, of conquest) that has been exhausted without necessarily disappearing. Though there have been many pictures that show at least one side of the American West just described, there has seldom been—and here I struggle to think of a proper antecedent—the type of vision that Mark Armijo McKnight's photographs provide, where that very landscape is no longer called upon to signify our mastery

over nature, and where instead it might still be the site of something elemental, primordial even—perhaps something beyond us entirely.

This is but a fraction of what McKnight allows us to contemplate in *Decreation*, an exhibition somehow sparse and expansive in equal measure, and one which signals a dramatic expansion of his art beyond the boundaries of photography. Those familiar with McKnight's work will be on familiar ground, but only just, as his photographs are accompanied by two limestone sculptures and a 16mm film eleven minutes long. Though the materials are heterogeneous, the works themselves, and their metaphoric registers, are closely intertwined.

The exhibition is staged in the Lobby gallery on the ground floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, a single room which is free and open to the public. Though he has much to contend with in the museum's lobby, McKnight asserts his own aural and temporal control, as the steady clicking of the metronomes—at times maddening and at others beautiful and overwhelming—in *Without a Song (solo ii)* (2024) effectively ruptures our connection to where we have just been. Projected to fill an entire wall, such that the grain of the film stock seems present and alive, the film sets a rhythm for the room that you cannot deviate from. Beginning with clouds passing over a white sun, the first and only cut introduces a metronome shot in close up. The film, in a literal sense, is about the steady addition of clicking metronomes—each at their own tempo—that gradually wind down as the frame slowly

zooms out to show the group of them (I counted a dozen or more) arranged throughout a cavernous geological formation. Though the clicking is relentless, once one adjusts and begins to hear it as a kind of music, then the more subtle, ambient sounds from the landscape can be heard thrumming in the background.

The two limestone sculptures that comprise *Duet* (2024) are placed in the center of the room and double as functional seating in front of the film. Elegantly imperfect and cool to the touch, they are incised with carvings on top that are meant to invoke a “mass” dial, a medieval form of time measurement that was used to indicate the start of church services for the day. McKnight's invocation of an older form of spiritual activity or religious ritual encourages us to suspend our drive to interpret and decode. McKnight uses the sonic chorus of the metronomes and the immovable permanence of the limestone slabs to recalibrate our sense of time and space—to estrange us from ourselves—so that a room which first felt like a kind of delirium ends up feeling closer to purification instead.

The rich monochromatic quality of the film should come as no surprise to those previously acquainted with McKnight's photographs: blacks that are absolute and whites that seem seared into place exist at either end of the tonal range, with the vast zone between them comprised of a complex gradient of gray, lead, and charcoal. His silver gelatin prints reassert this chromatic reality, doing so unencumbered by reflection of any kind as McKnight displays them framed but without glass. This is a

subtle but crucial detail that allows them to remain legible from across the room, so that nothing complicates our absorption of their materiality.

*Somnia* (2024) shows three masculine bodies lying curled together in a patch of grass strewn about with rocks and stones, while stretching off into the distance behind them is yet more of this rocky terrain. A distant chain of mountains completes the frame, pressing against what little sky remains. Their union in that coarse landscape is without reason or greater context; they seem joined together out of some necessity neither they nor we can ascertain. Next to them is *The Black Place (ii)* (2024), a picture that expresses McKnight's full capacity for seeing the body in the landscape and the landscape as a body. The bodies in *Somnia*—their overlapping limbs and folds of skin—are transfigured here into ripples of desert rock that stretch back through the barren yet sensual landscape to a place we cannot see.

*Anti-Mater* (2023) shows a female body lying in a field flowering with daisies while lost in a self-pleasuring act, with one hand between their legs and the other arm draped over their eyes. If we were to read this primarily as an image of abundance and stimulation, or as one of vitality, we would miss the inverse meaning McKnight encourages us to see. Though the body is alone and absorbed in reverie, it is not separate and apart from the landscape it is nestled in. The insects that have begun to crawl upon the body at just this moment remind us of the conceptual, as well as practical, folly of believing that total separation, or objective distance, between subject and world can be had or maintained. Likewise, it is crucial we see and think of a “body” rather than a fully-fledged subject, since what McKnight is trying to show us, or to literalize through form, are attempts at moving beyond the self, or at “decreating” it entirely, which is to say undoing it. Just as the bodies in *Somnia* were left to be seen as such because each face remained hidden, so too in *Anti-Mater* does the obscured face work to refuse our attempt to project our own subjectivity onto it, and instead to see the whole scene as some kind of container for a larger and more expansive meaning. This heuristic approach is further encouraged by *Ez Ozel (or: Father Figure)* (2023), in which the skeletal remains of an animal sit relief-like in an otherwise empty field of grass, bluntly suggesting a final stage in the undoing of the self.