

MARISA NEWMAN PROJECTS



Interior Egos *By Jennie Hirsh*

“The extension of the art of dwelling is the art of living—living in harmony with man’s deepest drives and with his adopted or fabricated environment.”

Charlotte Perriand, 1981

Rooted in love, partnership, common goals, and more, marriages are not only unions but also a series of negotiations between two people. Some connections are borne from similarities; others thrive on difference; and most are a combination thereof. Over time, such relationships, like all organisms, evolve, with some bonds growing stronger and deeper, others falling apart. Whatever their outcome, couples are paradoxically both constant and variable, fixed—even stagnant—while remaining dynamic. And, in most cases, sharing a life with another person involves sharing (and dividing up) space, time, and myriad experiences. Art, along with art-making, can provide a means through which to ask what it means to have not only a romantic but also a creative collaboration in unison.

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Close Quarters, the solo exhibition of New-York-based, multimedia artist Kevin Frances (b. Los Angeles, 1988), presents an ongoing series of wood block prints of interior spaces replete with traces of the lives contained therein. In particular, these rooms are the stage sets for the activities of the fictional artistic couple that occupies them: he is a writer, while she is a sculptor. But void of their human subjects, these rooms instead investigate how inanimate objects—furniture, lighting fixtures, and art works—allude to their imagined owners' emotional interactions as well as the tensions that inevitably emerge between them. His desk and computer face her ceramic sculptures in what could be described as a subtle series of domestic pas de deux, though desk and iMac, clay and kiln stand in for absent dancers. Rendered in a soft palette of pale grays, cool blues, and creamy tans with the occasional pop of fiery orange, these wood blocks explore coupling in a number of ways, literal and metaphorical, real and imagined: upstairs/downstairs, decorated living room/unfinished basement, word/image, and more. But whether arranged on top of or alongside one another, these spaces themselves carry the weight of a shifting power dynamic between their respective dwellers.

Trained as a sculptor as well as a printmaker, Frances does not work directly from life to make these prints of interiors. Instead, he painstakingly creates to-scale, miniature dioramas out of Sculpey clay that he then bakes in simple toaster oven that he keeps in his studio. Once done, these models give the artist the chance to experiment with organization as well as display, allowing him to photograph endless layouts of the spaces and assemblies of the details contained therein. These multiple but deliberate steps are not accidental; rather, aside from allowing for adjustments, each step offers another voyeuristic layer through which to investigate how a relationship might appear *from the outside*. Moreover, what transpires between individuals—as well as their possessions, from tool to creation—is never static. Instead, the artist paradoxically offers us still snapshots of this relationship *in flux*.

Frances's resulting environments, like *Meteorite* (2020), graphically render in wood block his diminutive clay versions of very specifically chosen items: copies of iconic, mid-Century modern classics—an black leather and rosewood Eames recliner, the Case Study Eames desk with a plywood top and white, blue, and red details on its recognizable drawer and side, a George Nelson Bubble lamp, and a minimalist sofa by Charlotte Perriand—along with a few more contemporary details, like a two-dimensional photographic “*Untitled*” (1989) print by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (typical of those displayed in stacks and designed to be taken home from gallery shows) above the couch and a Herman Miller Aeron chair for long days of writing. These remarkable replicas resonate on a number of levels. On the one hand, they signal a stylish, au courant space that mixes retro chic mid-century pieces with more recent, yet no less appealing, designs; on the other, many of these pieces themselves reflect on collaboration. The desk and lounge are both the product of and surrogates for design team Ray and Charles Eames—she originally a painter, he trained as an architect—who, despite the pervasive sexism of the 1940s-1960s, together signed most of their works, like these. Though not a part of an artistic team, Gonzalez-Torres dedicated much of his art to his life with (and tragic loss of) his partner Ross Laycock who succumbed to complications of the AIDS virus before the artist's own premature death. And, finally, the utterly simple, bench like sofa marries masculine, angular oak slats and metal to slightly softer upholstery as if to signal the enigmatic association of Le Corbusier with Charlotte Perriand, whose efforts were often

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overshadowed by the fame of her male counterparts. At the same time, these aesthetic choices in interior furnishings collide with the work of the couple themselves, as her raw, porous sculptures confront his high-tech computer equipment and more.

Membrane (2019) and *Poised Upon the Edge* (2021) introduce additional elements into the mix. The soft, prophylactic plastic wrapped and folded around the absent wife's sculptures functions in more than one way. First, it preserves the moisture in the clay, a tactic that allows the artist to continue to alter the piece before firing it. When wet, clay is still in play, a live medium responsive to touch and modification; once dry, the work loses its substantive vigor. In this sense, enshrouding the pieces has a practical purpose, though, metaphorically, it slows down the physical death that this mummification prefigures. At the same time, the material also protects the works from dust and humidity as well as unwanted touch and attention. In the close-up view provided by *Membrane*, the translucent plastic glistens and sparkles, elevated to the status of textile. Pulling back from the basement studio scene, *Poised Upon the Edge* offers icy, almost solid swathing that locks down the sculptures more permanently. Further intensifying the ambience of the gloomy work space are piled up and strewn about salmon buckets whose relatively electric color signals any intruder to stop before proceeding with caution, much like orange cones at a construction site.

Begun before and then produced throughout the work-from-home reality imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, these works subtly address the emotional as well as logistical and spatial shifts that so many couples experienced when suddenly forced to remain at home. By creating uncanny and ambiguous arrangements—these rooms are both specific to this couple and reminiscent of so many homes today whose décor has been influenced by the widespread reproduction and knockoff culture that exists around mid-century modern design—Frances explores the current reality for so many people seeking to carve out space for themselves physically as well as psychically, an anxiety that we witness taking form as her sculptures creep into his writing nook, and vice versa, as his sofa sneaks into her less finished but no less critical cinderblock framed workroom.

The window toward the top of the wall behind the desk in *A Cigarette Flicked Without Looking* (2022) suggests that he has moved into her subterranean lair where we read "...u were never," a fragmented phrase suggesting an accusatory tone on the part of the typist of that—presumably the husband's—iMac's keyboard. Perhaps the words are silently uttered in response to the ubiquitous sculptures that infringe on the desk and chair's attempt to mark out their own territory. And yet the title suggests that it could all "go up in smoke" due to (an unidentified) someone's failure to pay attention to his or her surroundings *Event Horizon* (2021) seems to travel back to the upstairs living room after dark with the husband's lit iMac screen holding a silent vigil alongside his wife's intrusive sculpture that, in hosting a fluorescent bulb, almost camouflages itself as part of an updated take on Dan Flavin's works. In both cases, these two glowing light sources—along with the Nelson pendant—not only create beautiful shadows but also suggest that amidst the struggle for space are passages of intellectual and emotional illumination. Perhaps it is in his newly configured stereoscopic sculptures that repurpose Frances's study photographs of his models to produce three-dimensional glimpses into these rooms where Frances enables his "characters" to come alive.

Muted but magnetic, Kevin Frances's *Close Quarters* ponders how people manage to cohabitate and collaborate, colonizing and dividing, advancing and retreating,

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as they move through periodic undulations in their relationships. Observation and introspection commingle on a fantastic yet quotidian domestic playground whose fiction articulates both unspeakable and unspoken truths about living apart together and together apart for everyone and no one at once.