

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Now and Then: The Rediscovery of Flora Mayo

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Gregory Volk June 3, 2017



Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Flora* (2017), film still, synchronized double-sided film installation with sound, 30 mins, loop (courtesy the artists, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin)

VENICE, Italy — There are one gazillion (and counting) contemporary artworks in Venice — at the Giardini pavilions, the vast Arsenale, the national pavilions dispersed through the city, and seemingly endless exhibitions basically everywhere. It is impossible to take everything in and easy to feel harried: you've seen this, but what about that, and do you really have time to sit down in one more darkened room to watch yet another long video?

Faced with this proliferation, I'd like to risk something radical. I'd like to focus on the one work in Venice that I found most riveting and that, to me, matters the most. It is *Flora* (2017) by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, a synchronized, double-sided film installation with sound at the Swiss pavilion. Watching one side takes 30 minutes, as does the opposite side. It is best to watch both in their entirety, and then maybe do it again. If I could, I would give this layered, richly human (and often tear-inducing, for many viewers) work my own private Golden Lion, inventing a new category: Best and Most Meaningful Work in the Exhibition.

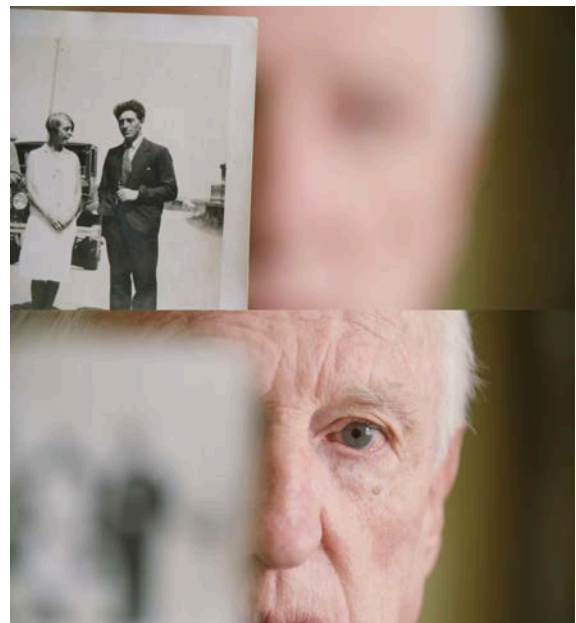
First, some background. The Swiss pavilion, which opened in 1952, was designed by acclaimed architect Bruno Giacometti, brother of Alberto Giacometti. Ironically, despite repeated invitations before and after the pavilion was built, nothing could persuade Alberto Giacometti — the most renowned Swiss artist of his era — to exhibit even in his own brother's new building.

The reasons were complex, but essentially the Paris-based Giacometti, who grew up in the Italian-speaking Val Bregaglia, close to the border with Italy, simply refused to represent Switzerland and to be pigeonholed as a Swiss artist. Giacometti had been in fact a strong presence at the Venice Biennale — he exhibited his suite of sculptures *Women of Venice* (1956) in the French Pavilion in 1956 and received the Grand Prize for Sculpture in 1962 — but not in the Swiss pavilion, or on behalf of Switzerland.

This year the Swiss pavilion and its sponsoring organization Pro Helvetia did something novel. A curator, Philipp Kaiser, was selected, not an artist. With the pavilion's history in mind he crafted an exhibition, also titled *Women of Venice*, featuring artworks responding to Alberto Giacometti: sculptures by Geneva-born American Carol Bove and the film installation by Hubbard and Birchler (Hubbard was born in Ireland, grew up in Australia, and bills herself as Irish/American/Swiss; Birchler is Swiss, and both divide their time between Austin, Texas and Berlin). At long last Kaiser has brought Giacometti into the Swiss pavilion but in a roundabout way, refracted through the work and visions of other artists.



Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Bust* (2017), silver gelatin print and brass sculpture with concrete base, Image: 88 x 72cm
Sculpture: 154 x 47,9 x 53,3 cm.
Installation view: Swiss Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2017 (courtesy the artists, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin. Photo by Ugo Carmen)



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Here is where things get fascinating. In their mesmerizing work, filled with enthralling shots that often seem exquisitely sculpted, Hubbard and Birchler interweave documentary and fiction to focus not on the famous Giacometti but instead on the almost completely unknown American artist Flora Mayo, who had left her husband, daughter, and comfortable conditions in Denver, Colorado for the life of an artist. For several years in Paris, from 1925 to 1933 (we learn all of this from the work), she and Giacometti were friends, classmates at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, studying under sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, and also lovers; as Flora's voiceover in the film, expertly performed by JeJu Caron, discloses, she called him "Jack" and he called her "The American."

In 1933, faced with severe financial distress when her family cut off their support, Flora left Paris, first destroying all her works, and returned to the US, where she eventually

had another child (a son) out of wedlock, and supported herself and him through agonizing menial labor, including working in an armaments factory during World War II and as a janitor in a Los Angeles office building. She was a downwardly mobile artist in eclipse, an artist, as the great American poet Theodore Roethke wrote in his shattering poem "In a Dark Time," "at odds with circumstance." Nothing of her work remains, save for one photograph showing her, Giacometti, and a bust she had made of him. Otherwise, she vanished from the historical record.

Enter Hubbard and Birchler. Researching Giacometti, they read James Lord's well-known *Giacometti: A Biography*. This is the first time they encountered Flora Mayo, in the photograph with the bust and in the author's brief and dismissive treatment of her. Lord assigns her a fleeting role in Giacometti's life and announces, apparently based on no evidence, that she ended her days in California "in demented solitude."

Hubbard and Birchler grew curious about this woman. They went into gumshoe mode. Google offered little: a link to Giacometti's enchanting plaster sculpture "Tête de Femme (Flora Mayo)" (1926), later cast in bronze, but scant information on Flora. Somehow they learned that she had a surviving son named David Mayo (the father is unknown) residing in suburban Los Angeles. They contacted him and he agreed to meet, giving his reason: no one, through all these years, had ever inquired about his mother or her relationship with Giacometti, and he had only recently learned about Giacometti for the first time, when his wife googled "Flora Mayo" and was directed to James Lord's book.

With David Mayo, Hubbard and Birchler hit the mother lode: a son's memories of his mother, but also letters, photographs, notes, and other documents squirreled away in musty chests that no one from the art world had ever seen. This primary material launched the film. Flora's "voice" in her notes and correspondence becomes the voiceover in the film, which incorporates deeply moving photographs of her as a child, in Paris with Giacometti and others, and in Los Angeles. From fragments and snippets, glimpses and hints, a complex woman emerges in a film that is part detective story, love story, family history, and searing biography.

One side of the film installation is in color and features David Mayo talking about his mother. Now 81 and uneasy in front of the camera, and with only rudimentary knowledge of his mother's years in Paris, and a scant familiarity with Giacometti or modern art, he is nevertheless a transfixing figure, discussing her "fortitude" as a single mom facing very difficult circumstances, her last years on "social welfare" in Los Angeles living on canned food while proudly refusing additional assistance, and her disappointing second trip to Paris, years after she first left, which he calls "living a little bit of a fantasy." You see him in a chair in his suburban home and driving his car. You see close-ups of his face twitching with emotion and of his fidgeting hands.

Interspersed is the Flora voiceover, recounting episodes of her early life in Denver (she remembers hearing her artistically inclined mother weeping while her father went off to meet another woman) and her time in Paris. How Mayo got to Paris and met Giacometti is quite a story. Her father was the owner of A.T. Lewis & Sons, at the time Denver's top department store, and she was educated at the best schools.

At 19 she married the man her father favored (although she emphatically did not love him), promptly had a daughter ("my beautiful baby girl!" the Flora voiceover enthuses in the film), and then scandalously left both husband and daughter to study art and be an artist in New York and Paris. How she could leave her daughter is one of many enigmas, including why she destroyed her work, why she ultimately abandoned her art, why David Mayo never met his father or his half-sister Joan, and whether Flora ever had contact again with her daughter.

The interplay between David Mayo and the Flora voiceover is extraordinary; it is as if an aged son is conversing with his young mother, learning about her previously hidden life for the first time, not only her relationship with Giacometti, but also her hopes and aspirations as an artist, all of which is completely foreign to him. When David Mayo reads aloud the passage about his mother in James Lord's book he is all measured

outrage: the single mom he knew, who had worked so hard in such trying conditions to support him bears no resemblance to the “demented” woman of Lord’s fantasy.

Uncanny correspondences abound. Flora had fled to, and for a time flourished in, Paris, with Versailles on its outskirts, and then wound up living in a seedy Los Angeles apartment building called The Versailles, where the camera dwells on its threadbare sign, and where David Mayo traipses down the corridor toward his mother’s former door. She worked with her hands as a sculptor and later worked with her hands as a janitor (“She cleaned toilets,” David Mayo tersely recounts. “She mopped floors.”)



Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Flora* (2017), film still, synchronized double-sided film installation with sound, 30 mins, loop (courtesy the artists, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin)

Stark questions of gender haunt this film from beginning to end. It was far easier for a man than a woman to make it as an artist in 1920s and 30s Paris, or anywhere else for that matter, and much else was arrayed against Flora: notably an arranged marriage and a family hostile to her artistic ambitions, coupled with limited, at best, opportunities for a single mother in mid-century America. All of which seemed to escape a famous biographer who, after studying the photograph of Flora, Giacometti, and her bust of him, wrote that she was “attractive but not beautiful” and had “something weak in her face” before later cavalierly dismissing her as “demented.”



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The opposite side of the screen is a black-and-white (save for one crucial transition into color which I'll discuss in a minute) narrative that takes place entirely in a meticulous re-creation of Flora's 1926 Paris studio, including a skull on a shelf, a wooden doll, and well-worn carpets. It's synchronized to the same soundtrack featuring David Mayo's voice, the Flora voiceover, and music, and exactly how Hubbard and Birchler achieved this synchronization so impeccably is a marvel. You see the young Flora (Julia Zange) intently sculpting her bust of Giacometti, who is sitting across the room.

Traditional roles are reversed: not a male artist scrutinizing a female model but a female artist eyeing a man. Flora hardly says a word (same for Giacometti, played by Jules Armana) but the intense, ever-changing thoughts and emotions playing over her face speak volumes. It's also not just art but the life of this studio that is so important: Flora chopping wood to make a fire in the cold morning; pouring milk into a dish for the hungry cat who laps it up (Melville, the cat, is acknowledged as an actor in the film's credits); weeping on the bed. Flora sways and Giacometti twists as they dance together to a jazz record; a shot of their scruffy shoes moving across the floor is utterly endearing. The two share a meal, with wine, and playfully smash a hard-boiled and raw egg together, not knowing which was which (Flora has the hard-boiled one). You feel their ardor and delight. And you can't help but think that here, or in a similar place, is where Flora really belonged: in a studio, as an artist.

In the part featuring David Mayo, the location shifts to Paris where Giacometti's 1926 sculpture of Flora is being packed up at the Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation to be sent to Kunsthaus Zürich. You then find David Mayo walking through Zürich toward the museum, while the Flora voiceover announces, "On March 10, 1933, in the pouring rain I left Paris. There is still a piece of me there." Alone at the museum, David Mayo climbs the stairs to see works by Giacometti in person for the first time; he seems very uncomfortable in a very alien place. He lingers at Giacometti's lovely sculpture of his mother, struggling with his emotions. Sculpture and son gaze at one another, her face and his. "This is my mom," he declares. "My mother." This scene is heartbreaking, and also wonderful. On the other side of the screen there is a moment when the imagery suddenly switches to color, which is so subtle that I'm betting many viewers don't register it at all. The view is a close-up of Giacometti's sculpture of Flora showing its ridges and indentations, subtle colors and contours, the touch of his fingers, a single fingerprint. Art is front and center, not as something reverentially ogled in a Swiss museum but as a cathartic force laboriously made, teased into existence, accompanied by doubts and mistakes, charged with emotion, and full of life.

On first viewing of the emotionally immersive *Flora*, I was transported and shaken; on the second even more so. Other works in Venice are more flashy and attention-grabbing. This one is, for me, by far the more compelling and profound.

Flora (2017) by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler continues in the Swiss Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale through November 26.



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