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ARTNEWS

'Existentialist in a Bikini': Artist Dara Friedman on Her Ascendant Life and Work in Miami



Dara Friedman, *Dichter* (still), 2017, four-channel HD color video transferred from 16mm film.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SUPPORTICO LOPEZ, BERLIN

Filmmaker Dara Friedman is a rigorous intellectual who likes to go barefoot, which explains in part why she wound up in Miami. Having been raised between Florida and Germany, where she was born in 1968, Friedman is now being touted as the quintessential Miami success story with a mid-career survey, "Perfect Stranger," at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. In her video installations and films, Friedman sets out to incite visceral emotions in viewers using the most minimal of means, namely barebones confrontations between performers and audiences without much in the way of costumes, sets, or special effects. Spanning 20 years, the 16 works at the Pérez range from *Bim Bam* (1999), in which the artist is seen slamming a pair of doors, to her most recent work, *Dichter* (2017), in which 15 extremely extroverted actors recite poems that had a formative influence in their youth. There is little need for translation in the language-intensive *Dichter*, even though the performances are in German—as with all of Friedman's work, the powerful sensations conveyed bridge cultural boundaries and touch on universal themes.

After seeing the show at the Pérez, *ARTnews* spoke with Friedman about her first experience of seeing so many of her works together in one place and her relationship with the city of Miami (where her work also features in an installation in the "Nova" section of Art Basel Miami Beach).

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Dara Friedman, *Bim Bam*, 1999, 16mm film installation with two slot-loading projectors and sound.

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ARTnews: How would you advise people to go through this show to get the most out of the various films?

Dara Friedman: I don't think you need to come knowing anything in particular. You can know a gazillion things and that's fine, and you can know nothing and that's also fine. You can know about structural film and art history, or you can come knowing nothing and still understand the work.

You have said it takes a long time for each work to reach completion. Who do you bounce ideas off of while you are working on the films?

Friedman: I'm a Virgo, Scorpio rising, so I am incredibly critical of myself. But I talk it over with Mark Handforth, my husband whom I met in art school, and, in the last years, with my two daughters, who are kind yet blunt. They are 17 and almost 15. But they're generous, too, so I trust them. If they say something's off, I know they are doing it with the best intentions.

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Dara Friedman, *Dancer* (still), 2011, Super 16mm film transferred to HD video, black and white, sound, 25 minutes.

©DARA FRIEDMAN/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK/COLLECTION OF PÉREZ ART MUSEUM MIAMI, PARTIAL GIFT OF ROBERT AND DIANE MOSS

People need to know that they are not going to see narrative type films, right?

Friedman: If you come knowing you are coming to an art museum, then you will be OK. You are not going to get popcorn at the front door or settle into seats for an hour and a half, because it's not a cinema. I think sometimes people are worried going to see film or video at an art museum, because they think it's going to be boring—but I don't think it is. My work is really carefully paced. I know when I'm satisfied with an image and a sound and it's time to move on. I've got it. I'm forced to be my own best audience. And I really get a real bang out of it. The films are in effect made for me, so if I am not satisfied with it, I am not going to show it to anyone else. It takes a long time. I'm not slow and lazy. I think with other artists there is this great demand for work—produce this and produce that. No one is demanding I make work, so I make it when it becomes undeniable.

What is it like seeing all your early work together in one big room?

Friedman: I was nervous to put it together with no walls—oh my god, would this work? But this summer I put all the sound together and it really did work, because the energy is consistent. There's no speaking. It's just banging and slamming and whipping and crunching. It's all different versions of a state of mind, so it works together. It's both gratifying and a bit sad to see my person of 20 years ago. It feels good but also, like, “Shit, time passes.” I love that work and I love that person who just dived in. She was alright. She did things simply and not that much has changed.

How have you evolved?

Friedman: You become better, more conscious. It sounds corny, but it is a moving into consciousness of who you are. When you are younger, you are how you are, and you don’t quite know why—you just are that way and then as time goes you have to sort of explain yourself or move into consciousness of who you are. You become more virtuoso. You can do more things at once.

How did you make *Dancer* (2011), the film in which you had trained dancers perform movements on the streets of Miami?

Friedman: *Dancer* was one of those things that sat around for a long time. I found an entry in an old notebook that said “make film with dancers,” so that was the beginning. But I didn’t know that many dancers, so I put out an ad titled “What moves you?” I did not want to tell them how to move. I wanted them to show me how they wanted to move. Plus, it’s a line poached from Pina Bausch. I knew this was something that the kind of dancer I was looking for would respond to and understand. I held auditions in the museum. I wanted to contextualize it because otherwise, in Miami, I would just get erotic dancers. After I brought them together, I asked them how they would spend their day so I would get a picture of who they are. That helped me do the dramaturgy.

How did you plan the shoots?

Friedman: I know the city really well, and it just was like seating people at a dinner, like the movement will have a good conversation with this place. I put it together like a big puzzle. You have traffic flow and you have the direction of the lights. It was all done with tracking shots, so that has to be on the correct side of the road so you are not driving into oncoming traffic.

In *Play* (2013), you had 18 couples—most paired together by you—act out moments of intimacy.

Friedman: I had so much fun making that. [Curator] Ali Subotnick asked me out to do a residency at the Hammer Museum. In the American Museum of Natural History in New York, there’s a little prehistoric couple—they are hairy and really small, and he has his arm around her. Also, in the Met, there are those statues of ancient Egyptians, and they have the arm around the woman. I wanted to make a work about that. When somebody puts their arm around someone else, what’s that about? Then I thought maybe I was making a sex film. But I was told, “No, no, no: sex films are a big industry in L.A., and you are not making a sex film—you are making a film about intimacy.” There are so many actors in L.A. so I posted an open audition call once again and someone posted it at CalArts in the theater department. I got a whole bunch of theater students who were so game. I coupled them. No one has sex—there’s no actual sex. At the Pérez, they were going to put a nudity warning at the entrance, and I said, “You can’t do that—people will be disappointed. They’ll be looking for the nudity, and there’s no nudity. You will be setting us up for failure.”

Why did you originally settle in Miami?

Friedman: I grew up in Florida, and in Germany, too. And I had been living first in Frankfurt and then in London with Mark, whom I met in art school. My friend Alexandra Mir said, “You know, you are the existentialist in a bikini.” I like

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to wear not a lot of clothes. I like to be barefoot. London was too expensive and it was cold, and it was boring being that poor there. [From Florida] you could get up to New York on \$60 and a tank of gas. I think a lot of artists are not that naturally extroverted. Having to see a lot of people makes me tired and does not leave a lot of energy for making work. Here, you really don't have that many interactions. You can get on with making the work. At the same time, there's so much going on in New York, you would be desperate not to miss anything. Down here, I didn't know what I was missing. I just got on with making things. It sort of worked for me. It was so much less expensive here. You could really bridge the gap between art school and your professional life. It was cheap—\$500 a month and you could get by and devote yourself to it full time.

How do feel being the model of a successful Miami artist?

Friedman: I guess if it had to be somebody, I'm glad it's me. That's kind of awesome. I'm 49 years old, and I feel really mature. I feel like I really have something to say. I am full of doubt, but I do know how to make artworks at this point. It is incredibly lucky and amazing. Consistency and stick-to-it-iveness may not be sexy or glamorous, but they have their merits. It takes time, and film is a time-based medium. Now there's 20 years of work, 20 years of rolling. I am glad it's me at this point. It's awesome.