

## Kayne Griffin Corcoran



**Miami artist's videos are known around the world.  
Now, locals can see them too.**

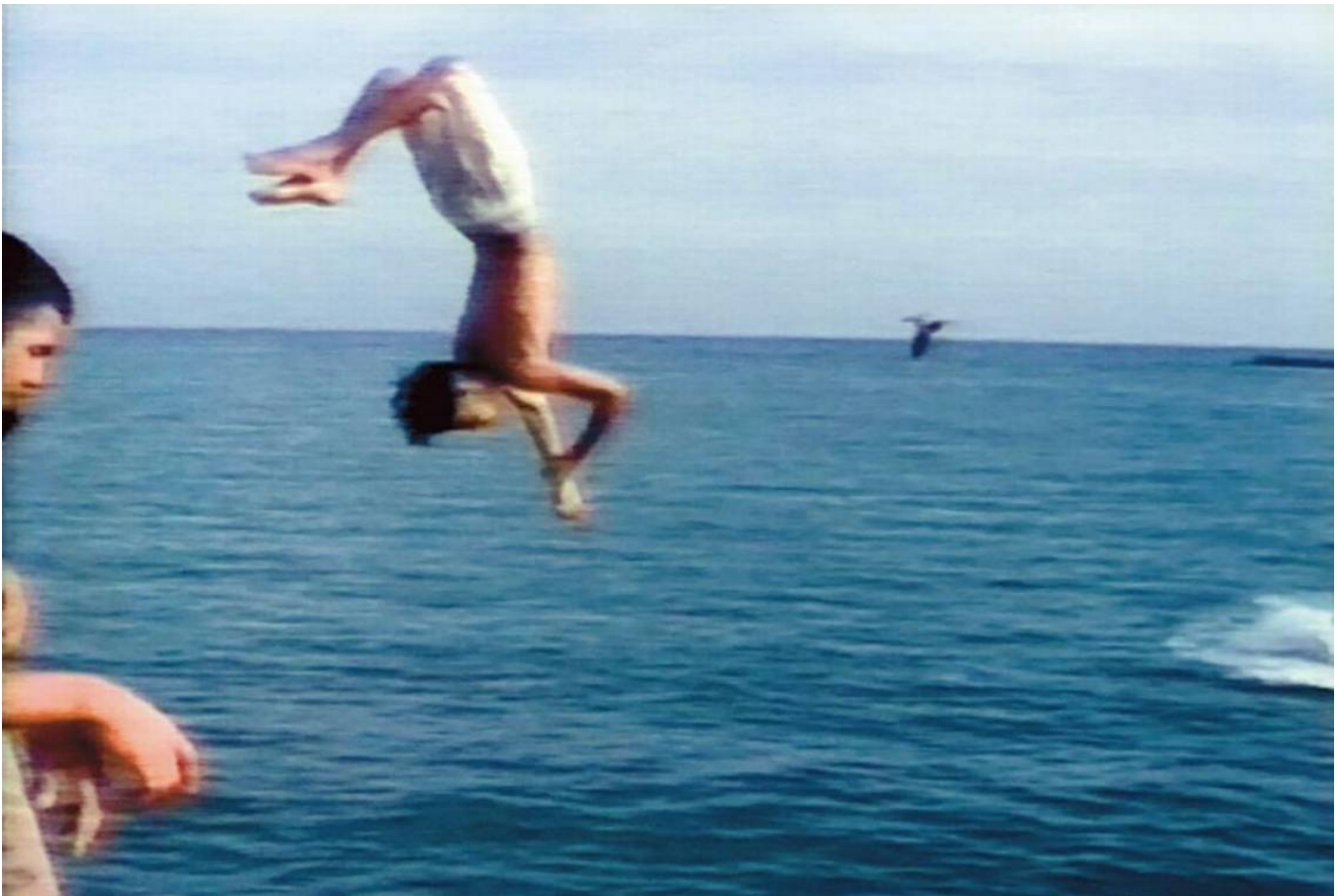


Dara Friedman's "Mother Drum," 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

There's a lovely juxtaposition in the way we view and absorb the 16 videos and films in Dara Friedman's mid-career retrospective currently at Pérez Art Museum Miami. While much of what is projected on screen are compositions of bodies in motion — free-style dancing, singing, performing — an unmistakable precision and attention to detail become part of the visual experience when moving through the galleries of "Dara Friedman: Perfect Stranger."

In one large room, several films are screening. One is a triptych of three women unbuttoning and revealing their bras while seeming to almost fly. One is comprised of two screens of a woman (the artist) slamming doors, letting in yellowish light when the doors are open, and going black when slammed shut.

The third is a single screen — from a TV set placed on the floor. But the sound and projecting equipment specifically configured in the middle of the room are also integral to this installation. So, too, is the lovely wooden viewing bench, made for the show. It's in this room in particular where we can see Friedman's holistic presentation of her art: She varies the sizes of the screens, and the number of them, from three to one. And she incorporates the actual equipment and seating options to become part of the experience.



Dara Friedman's "Government Cut Freestyle," 1998

In other more sound-proof rooms, where only a single film is screened, the careful editing and the artist's clear love of film production enable us to feel the ongoing wonderful tension between free-form expression and meticulous execution.

This combination may derive from Friedman's background. Born in Germany to a Jewish-American father and German mother, she married British sculptor Mark Handforth. The couple moved to Miami in the early 1990s, where they and their two daughters have lived ever since. Her work reveals a bit of both a structured German and an uninhibited Miamian.

But while Friedman has made work here for decades, most of her art has been exhibited elsewhere, in museums and galleries from Los Angeles to Berlin, thanks in part to her New York-based gallery, the powerhouse Gavin Brown's Enterprise. Her films have been shot in locations ranging from the streets of Miami to Native American reservations. She's well-known to have casting calls, where she asks for people to come and audition for "parts" that include dancing, or singing, or reciting poetry.

There rarely is a concrete narrative; the films are more about reflecting and appreciating the way bodies, and people, move and interact with our environments. Connectivity is a key theme, aimed at breaking down barriers between people and even spaces. According to the exhibit's curator, PAMM's René Morales, Friedman creates an intensity that she uses to "reach viewers directly and at a gut level, with the ultimate goal of encouraging and fostering empathy toward others. Dara helps us to see ourselves and others with greater clarity."



Dara Friedman's "Dancer," 2011.

"Perfect Stranger" is her first major survey exhibit, and the largest show PAMM has given to a locally based artist. In the introduction to the substantial book-catalogue for the exhibit, PAMM's director, Franklin Sirmans, explained the origins of devoting this space and time to Friedman's work. "While there is no question that Friedman occupies a major place within this community, she is also notable for being one of the city's most internationally recognized exhibited artists," he writes. "Her trajectory powerfully embodies the possibility that life as an artist in Miami is not just viable, but that the city can serve as an excellent home base for a global artistic career."

One of the most significant works in the show is "Dancer," from 2011, which reflects her sense of style and composition. In a co-production with PAMM, Friedman put out a casting call for dancers of all types, including those whose backgrounds were in ballet, belly-dancing and folk traditions, and those who were street performers or pole dancers. After auditions at the museum, Friedman brought 66 of them to various streets in Miami and individually filmed them doing their thing. The resulting film is accompanied by a musical soundtrack that allows some of the city's sounds to filter in. It's a lively, flowing, 25-minute journey.

Here again, Friedman has incorporated the entire room into the experience. Over a large window overlooking the bay to the left of the screening area, she has placed a pinkish-purple translucent screen, which bathes that side of the room in a glowing aura.

Two much smaller screens face off with each other in front of another large window, this time looking out to PAMM's Hanging Gardens of Babylon-styled veranda. They showcase "Sunset" (2005), which also features Miami characters. Here, a man and a woman ask simple domestic-type questions of each other, but also seem to talk over one another. "Should I cut my hair?" "Are you going to turn off the light?" "Will you be on time?"

Her latest piece, "Dichter (Poet)" from 2017, is far more Germanic than some of the others, and not just because these actors are speaking German. There is a 1920s Expressionist, surreal feel to them, as 16 performers recite a favorite poem on multiple screens on all walls of a room, some of them with exaggerated makeup reminiscent of



Screen shot from Dara Friedman's "Dicther," 2017.

early 20<sup>th</sup> century German films. Sometimes the voices are angry and are shouting, producing a chaotic sound and atmosphere; sometimes the recitations are quieter, and it all becomes disorienting.

More similar to "Dancer" is the earlier "Musical" from 2007-2008, which was filmed on New York streets. For this film, participants were asked to sing a song meaningful to them. The resulting 48-minute color video conveys a light spirit as people of all colors and genders belt out show tunes or Michael Jackson — but this being New York, no one on the street or subway is really paying any attention.

We are constantly wondering what the incidental performers are asking, what they are trying to tell us. For instance, in 1999's "Bim Bam," the artist filmed herself slamming doors and letting light in and out; the figures are projected horizontally, so they are perpendicular to the floor, and the actual sound of the slamming doors is not synchronized. This again is disorienting, and makes us spend some extra time not just admiring the visuals but noting what we are starting to feel.

Friedman's most recent film unspools on three screens. "Mother Drum" (2016) documents tribal dancers and drummers during powwows on three western Native American reservations in a post-modern way. The tragic plight of Native Americans is a blight on American history, and this is certainly part of the theme of "Drum." But it's also a hypnotic trip highlighting tribal traditions with a skewed editing process that makes it not really a documentary. We see beautiful color schemes, horses wading in a river and other effects that make it a dreamy visual.

If there is one objection to this show, it's the fact that there is so much of it. With films ranging in length from a couple of minutes to well over 20, it almost forces the visitor to move on before fully appreciating what is happening in these environments. It is supposed to be a mid-career survey for the 49-year-old, so it's understood that it should include works from decades ago until today. But that means a return trip should be on your schedule, in order for Friedman's conversation and connection to continue.