

## Kayne Griffin Corcoran

# VOGUE

Dara Friedman's Gripping Films Capture the Human and the Extraordinary



Chrissy, Mette and Kristan, 2000, by Dara Friedman. Three 16mm color films with optical sound.  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist / Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

A series of thickly curtained portals leads audiences on a labyrinthine path through "Perfect Stranger," a survey show of Dara Friedman's films at Miami's gorgeous Pérez Art Museum, on view through March 4, 2018. "For me, it was like Oz," says Friedman, an artist in her 40s whose work has evolved in the past two decades from Super 8 films to sustained and ambitious pieces involving multiple participants. "The fact that behind the curtain it's just a person who makes everything happen is a strong idea for me."

Finding the human in the extraordinary, and vice versa, is a big theme for Friedman, who grew up between Germany and South Florida. An early piece, *Total*, from 1997, shows the artist systematically destroying the contents of a room, smashing, hurling, and stomping on the furniture. But the film is shown in reverse, turning the chaos of the action back, Mary Poppins-like, into perfect order. "Wiping something out or negating it is a creative act," Friedman says. "You're creating something even if you're destroying it." Another piece, *Whip Whipping the Wall* (2002), finds her attacking the wall of a room with a bullwhip until it begins to cave in. "It's about the really basic impulse to push through to something else," she says.

Friedman, who lives in a lush bohemian compound in Miami's Coconut Grove neighborhood with her husband, British-born sculptor Mark Handforth, and their two daughters, came to film through dance. An aunt, who was a classmate of

MacSweeney, Eve. "Dara Friedman's Gripping Films Capture the Human and the Extraordinary," *Vogue*. 10 November 2017. Web.

Pina Bausch's, was an early proponent of dance theater, and Friedman kept up her own practice through college. Dancers feature in a number of her works, from *Mother Drum* (2015), which documents Native American tribal dancers across the country, to *Rite* (2016), a double-sided diptych film of two ballet dancers improvising to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* that is so intense and visceral, you feel as though you are inside the room with them. When working with performers, amateur or professional, Friedman says, "I get really close to them, so they get very comfortable with me being in their space."



*Mother Drum*, 2015-16, by Dara Friedman. Three-channel HD color video with sound.  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist / Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York.

*Dancer* (2011)—said to have been an inspiration for Pharrell Williams's "Happy" video—creates a seamless flow of performers joyously executing their moves around the streets of Miami and has an exuberance that is one of Friedman's hallmarks. For *Musical* (2007), she assembled mostly enthusiastic amateurs by open audition, who were asked to sing "their song" and then were situated in different spots in midtown Manhattan at various times of day, from dawn to night. The result is a giant puzzle of disparate vocalizations, from opera to pop to musical theater, united by its participants' ownership of those moments and their urge for self-expression.

Each film, more open-ended and dream-fueled than narrative storytelling, takes you inside an experience full of surprise and possibility. "Dara's exhibition is very much about the way that we think about people from different places," says the Pérez Museum's director, Franklin Sirmans. "It's the idea that a contemporary art exhibition is a means of talking between people and of understanding them better."

Friedman sees these insights as being yielded by creating the right circumstances. "I found that with the singers and dancers, you don't know who somebody is until they show you," she says. "If I start to judge from outer appearance, I'm always wrong. Then when someone can sing or dance or do something well—they are just waiting to be asked to shine."

— Eve MacSweeney