

ARTNEWS

Desire in Absentia: 'The Love Object' Sends Mixed Signals at Team Gallery

BY *Angela Brown* POSTED 02/17/17 5:39 PM

Through February 18, in New York



Allison Branham, *less frightening when motionless*, 2016, plaster, dyed velvet, cotton thread, wax, glitter, aluminum, nails, cotton stuffing, and acrylic, 6 x 13 x 6 inches.

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Love, the word itself, drips with sentimentality—and often, derision. Yet, from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) to Etta James's "At Last," we cling to its representations. Does the love in literature, art, film, and music eclipse that which is directly experienced? Is love experienced directly?

"The Love Object" also sheds light on types of love that tend to be left out of the usual discourse. *Body Double 34 (After My Own Private Idaho)*, 2016, a video by Brice Dellsperger, shows women on the covers of *Transliving* in motion, their hair blowing in the wind. The glossy magazine covers suggest the amorous underpinnings of fandom—the admiration, idolization, even obsession directed toward celebrity. Then, Heji Shin's *Baby 8* (2017), a dark, gory image of a baby emerging from the birth canal, opens up the question, and the depths, of a mother's love. Love sways precariously between life and death.

Literary theorist Roland Barthes writes that love moves in one direction, that it is imposed upon the love object by the desiring I. “An always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*,” he wrote in *A Lover’s Discourse* in 1977. The “desiring I” defines itself via an absence, and the works included in this exhibition examine the complexity of the absence.

Martine Syms and Zoe Barcza express the distance between self and other, reality and fantasy, through a cultural vocabulary, employing subtle appropriations of literary and cinematic reference. In

Syms’s *Belief Strategy XIII* (2014–16), a photograph shows a white hand resting lightly on a black hand, both wearing wedding rings. The image sits on a bright-purple C-stand (the kind used in film production to position light modifiers). “Syms wanted the viewer to see the stand and say ‘The Color Purple’ out loud,” Brewer said. This spurs a consideration of how the challenges of love and race are depicted in major films—how fictional narratives are stored in our cultural consciousness, affecting how we expect real love to function. Meanwhile, Barcza painted a scene from Stanley Kubrick’s 1999 erotic drama *Eyes Wide Shut*. In blood-red acrylic, anger and ownership lurk beneath the recognizable scene of William Harford (Tom Cruise) and Alice Harford (Nicole Kidman) in a passionate kiss. In black lettering between the couple, the word “FIDELIO” quickly becomes sinister instead of romantic.

“The Love Object,” a group exhibition currently on view at Team Gallery in SoHo, asks these questions, and many others. Tom Brewer, who organized the show, explained in a walkthrough that his curatorial process began with the work of American photographer Sam Samore. In Samore’s *Scenes #2* (2016), included in the exhibition, a woman leans over a billiard table, focused and aiming. She is seen through a blur in the foreground, as in those cinematic moments when time slows down and all but the beloved fades out of focus. Yet, the beloved knows not that she is being watched. (And we, as spectators, do not know that the beloved is a trans person, from a series of photographs that Samore took in Thailand.) The evocation of surveillance, a running theme in Samore’s work, provokes the immediate construction of a narrative, and a questioning of the intentions of the voyeur.



Martine Syms, *Belief Strategy XIII*, 2014–16, c-stand and archival pigment print, 98 x 68 x 32 inches.

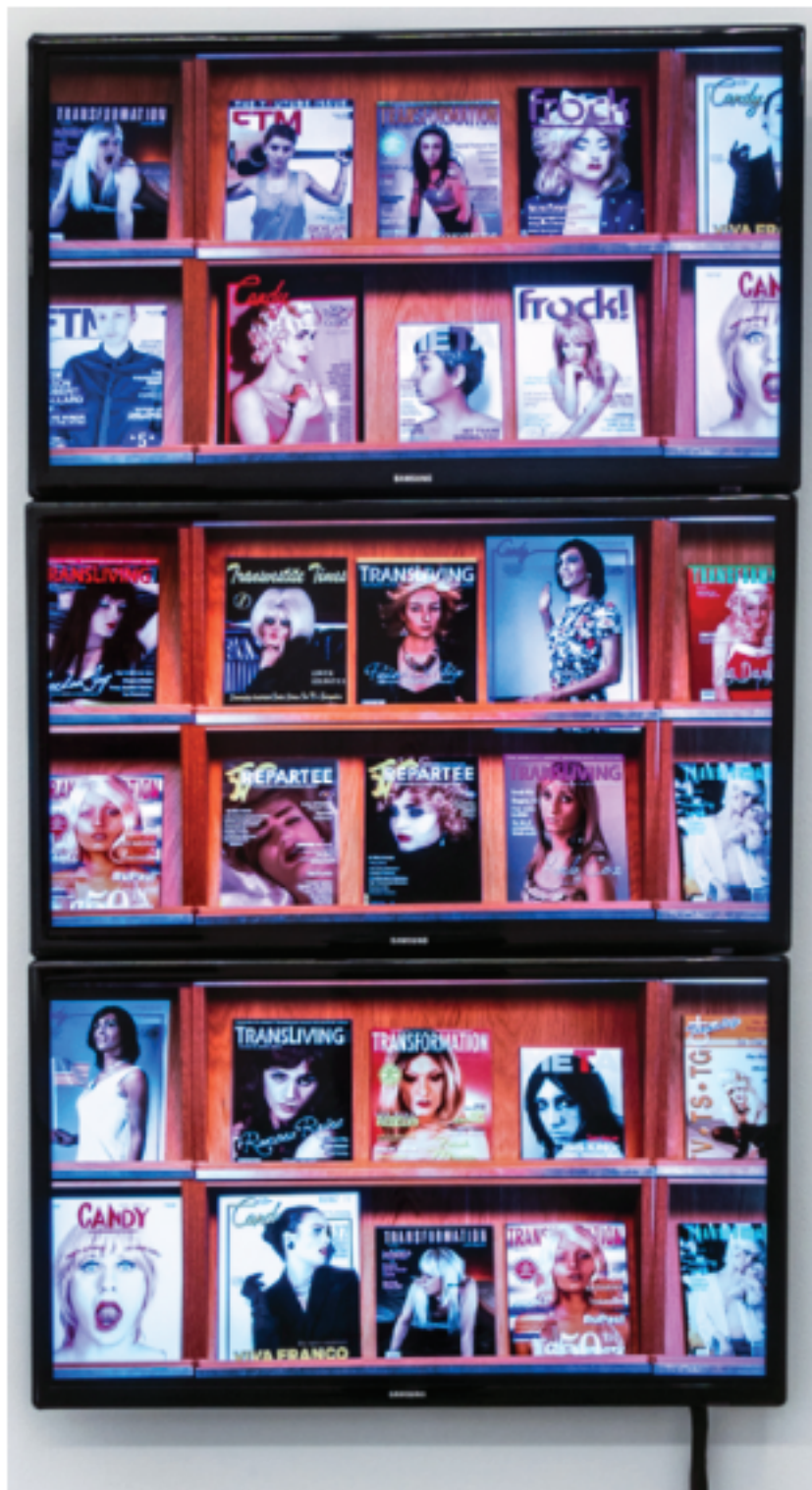
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For the digital age, lived love and performed love are often one and the same. In Georgia Wall's video *Barthes & The Cranberries* (2014), the Cranberries dreamily sing, "And in the day, everything's complex / There's nothing simple when I'm not around you / But I miss you, when you're gone." The lyrics scroll in yellow font, interspersed among lines from *A Lover's Discourse*, such as, "But isn't desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent?" Behind the text, Wall performs a striptease for a webcam. Who is watching? Does it matter if anyone is watching?

Let's Get Physical/Digital (1997), by Christian Jankowski, takes the internet love affair back to its earliest days. The artist and his girlfriend, during a long-distance phase of their relationship, communicated in a chatroom, saving their conversations to be

performed later by hired actors. In the resulting footage, a couple gets into bed, one actor asking "Hello, are you there?"

Many of these questions about love can also easily be asked of art. Are we not drawn to what reveals to us a bit of ourselves, in the same way we'd seek a lover who might make us feel "whole?" Realizing that it is impossible to fully merge with the beloved, the rituals of love become a grand theater. "Every passion, ultimately, has its spectator," Barthes writes. Brewer has amassed an assortment of loves, setting them in the theater of the gallery, where, faced with one contradiction after another, the spectator witnesses the breakdown of language. In love, never as predictable as we hope it might be, reality passes into the uncanny, the lover mutates, and the self transforms. The love object, like the art object, is an escape.



Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 34 (After My Own Private Idaho)*, 2016, three-channel video, with sound, 5 minutes, 5 seconds.

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