



OMER FAST

RYMER GALLERY
OCTOBER 25 - JANUARY 3

ON MAKING *LOOKING PRETTY FOR GOD (AFTER GW)*

When you first thought of Looking Pretty for God, Omer, back when it was tentatively called Body Work, you had the concept of combining the words of morticians with the image of a barber. Then you dropped the barber. Why?

Omer: Initially I was looking for an encounter, an encounter that would involve bodies but not necessarily the body speaking. What I think was attractive to me, and is shared by the barber and embalmer, is the very intimate encounter between two persons. I thought at the time that those two industries or activities—these kinds of service providers—would allow me to cut between them and create parallels between the body serviced in life and in death. But one of the classic things about barbers is that they also serve as kinds of therapists or counselors, as bookies, who knows what else. Maybe one of the reasons I dropped the barber is because I wanted to avoid any conversation. I knew that I wanted to supply the audio, the narrative, from somewhere else.

And I think at some point, I decided to drop the juxtaposition of a mortician and barber just because it would probably be too facile a connection, inviting a little bit too much of that sort of “gotcha” reading of the piece. You know, when the mortician is talking about trimming the hair and you see the barber trimming the hair. I think I wanted to maybe find a context, a visual context, that was a little bit farther.

Can you talk about how the idea of the child actor emerged?

Omer: I think every person is faced with a wonderful conundrum the moment he or she has their first child, and that is: What now? How am I going to work? And how am I going to sort out my life? Inevitably, this has a corollary in wanting to make a work for kids or about kids, or involving kids. In all honesty, I’ve fallen victim to this first-child syndrome and have tried to choose the lesser of all evils when making this work. But I think having my first child this year may have been the motivating thing. I lost my fear of kids.

Chelsea, did you have any expectations going into this project?

Chelsea: I had worked on film and video projects before, but I didn’t have a lot of experience with productions of this size. What I felt was most interesting about it was the way a project invariably changes as it runs its course—you have an original idea, and then it shifts—and in this project what struck me the most was that this space for the process was kind of built in.

When Omer and I were in New York doing the audio, those recordings and the conversations that we had about them really drove his thinking about how the work was going to develop. It wasn’t based on a decision to change. Changes came from thinking about how the narrative could better

distill meaning by shifting our production. The way that we were able to talk about things contributed to this. Omer knew what he wanted, but we were able to talk through the changes.

In one case, we were sitting on the ferry to Staten Island, going to our third interview. We had arranged to do four interviews with morticians. Things came up in the interviews, content-wise, that were particularly interesting and that we hadn’t anticipated, lots of things we couldn’t have foreseen in organizing them. After we’d done two interviews, Omer brought up that he just felt like we should shift how we were going to structure the piece. The way that conversation happened made me think that it wasn’t coming from him abruptly changing his mind and telling me what we were going to do next; it was a suggestion and conversation. So while he decided that he wanted to make a shift in direction, the way we changed the piece came out of us deciding this together and seeing what was possible, what made sense, seeing what we had time for, and that made me feel really confident in pursuing the rest of the project.

Can either of you recall small moments of change, any other adjustments or shifts along the way?

Chelsea: The morticians we talked to in New York had really different ways of articulating what they were going through. Some of them wanted to talk about things beyond life; some wanted to talk just about the aesthetics and the fact that they wished that they had been artists and wanted to do reconstruction.

I feel like there was something inherent in the content of the interviews we had with the morticians that had to do with the unknown and the changeability, sort of the inevitability or ineffability of existence. I think listening to these guys talk played into a certain kind of flexibility that we needed to approach the work.

That experience translated to Chicago when we were scouting locations. There were funerals happening around us. The locations we used had people coming in; there were bodies on gurneys in the back. We had to work with someone who would be flexible and willing to let a crew come in and work. I think the need for mutual respect between film production and funeral production—respect for the intimacy and precision required of both acts—played into how we approached the content of the work.

Omer: I’ve now done several works that have started with an interview with someone who experienced something firsthand. During interviews, what I try to do is basically encourage people to talk about details and describe things rather than engage them on a kind of metaphysical level. I

find that allowing people to talk produces an “artless pile of details,” as a journalist friend of mine called it, from which I can edit to my wishes.

We found out after one or two interviews that the kind of opinions we were going to get from the funeral directors about what happens after death, and what they believe in, were kind of standard answers. I think partly it’s because you run into the limit of people’s beliefs and people’s knowledge; they don’t necessarily have any more knowledge or light to shed on this. But their activity, what they do on a daily basis, holds such a fascination for us, nevertheless. I realized that the more philosophy we were going to bring in, the more we were going to run into a wall: the wall of what happens after death. So the next best thing was to talk about what happens to the body after death. In certain ways, they were able to talk about that. And so the moment we focused on the details of what they do, the more interesting and the more relevant the piece became for us and, hopefully, for the viewers as well.

Chelsea: I also think, Omer, there’s a really interesting barrier built into the mortician’s professional attitudes: they have to face peoples’ grief all the time, every day, and that’s a really hardening factor. At the same time, they have to go into these intimate poses with people behind the closed doors and with these bodies that had just been alive. It takes a specific kind of person who can develop that kind of strength.

It also relates to the idea of the surface and the visual space of the piece as it is played out with the children as models: they are posed as aesthetic objects. There were all those intimate moments when their nails were cut, and they were sleeping, almost as if dead. So you start entering into this gray area between two spaces, between the narrative and the reality of what those people do.

Omer: Well, also another thing I’d forgotten was that these funeral directors are professionals working in the service industry, and they have a public image. I think it would have taken a lot more time and effort to break through their professional facade. Not that I was necessarily looking for this, but I definitely realized at an early point that it would be better to focus on their daily activities, their routine with the bodies that they work with. So that’s another point of change in the process.

An unexpected aspect was also that the mortuary location where we filmed dictated the mood. It forced us to be relaxed. You know, if you’re surrounded by dead people and by the people who attend to dead people, you’re not yelling. You tend to be quiet. You tend to be a little more patient just because you realize that everything is finite, everything has an end, including the production. So after we got rid of the sort of shudder of being surrounded by bodies on gurneys, it

actually ended up being relatively comfortable—a much more comfortable working environment than I think any of us had anticipated.

So where did the title Looking Pretty for God (After GW) come from?

Omer: One of the funeral directors was telling us that this was an answer that his child gave in the classroom when asked what do your parents do for a living. I thought the answer resonated and also expressed a way of avoiding to talk about what the parents really do. Of course it’s possible the child doesn’t really know what they do, but the answer certainly packs quite a bit of poetic punch for me. So I liked that quote from the beginning.

After GW is an acknowledgement to Gillian Wearing, since part of the technique I used was very much inspired by one of her pieces that I saw maybe ten years ago. The piece, *10-16* (1997), was important to me when I was in graduate school. She got children to talk about their dreams or fantasies, then had adult actors lip-sync these kids’ fantasies—what they’re afraid of and whatnot.

I’m using that technique in very short, isolated fragments and pieces. (And, of course, in reverse: it’s the kids who are now



OMER FAST AND CHELSEA TONELLI KNIGHT

endowed with adult knowledge and possessed by an adult voice.) It’s a way of bringing together those two fields—the field of funeral directing and embalming, and the field of, say, child photography—through the representation of the child, through the body of a child. In a sense, it is also a kind of possession, a sort of horror-movie type of possession, where the host body is taken over by some other entity that makes it function and talk differently. (There are also religious parallels to this, etc.) Anyway, it’s no longer either of the industries that is talking, but some hybrid of the two, like speaking in tongues, I suppose...

Was there anything significant about the fact that you were working with an educational institution, with SAIC, as the commissioner of the piece, rather than with a professional production house or a museum? Did this change your attitudes towards the piece or the process?

Omer: It changed more than my attitude; it changed everything that we did and made the production a lot easier (and a lot less expensive). But perhaps what’s more important is that the people who worked with me—especially Chelsea from the beginning—made the project into more of a collaboration.

The School provided not only equipment, but also production people and help. And these people had been through

the art school; they’re not the usual production people with a film or TV background. So they had what you need when you work on these types of projects where there is a lot of spontaneous decision-making and stuff that goes against the playbook of, say, the cinematographer, the gaffers, the grips, and so on. It feels more comfortable to produce a project with art people around because they are more familiar with what you’re doing.

At the same time, I think it allowed us to have flexibility not only in terms of people, but also equipment. We could put everything in the truck and take it with us, and not worry about how many hours we were using it or how many days we had it. I produced two pieces in 2008. The second piece made in July in California had a much bigger budget and about fifty people involved—and it was such a nightmare compared to producing *Looking Pretty for God (After GW)* with SAIC. So I think very fondly of the days I spent in Chicago with this team.

Chelsea, what has working on this piece meant to you as an artist? Has it changed your work, or where you will go forward from here?

Chelsea: Until I worked with Omer, I’d made work on a budget of a thousand dollars or less, doing the writing, shooting, editing, producing, and often even the acting on my own. So this gave me a lot of confidence to work on a larger scale. Recently, I got a small grant and went on a residency to produce quite a larger-scale piece than I’d ever made before, shooting with three cameras and building professional stage sets. I had learned a lot through my work with Omer, process-wise and budget-wise. So I was able to really push myself into a realm where I could map out a larger project and feel confident that I could find the funds. As an artist, it was great because not only was I able to support him professionally in making this piece, but also get considerable professional training.

Omer: It was a total pleasure to produce this piece. This was definitely the highlight for me in 2008. I know a lot more about death and dying now! Plus, as a person who has a lot of fears, and as a person who’s reluctant to put himself into any kind of confrontational or frightening situations, I use my work as a sort of proxy. I use it as a way collecting the kind of experiences that I would collect on my own if I had more courage. So I think that approaching the theme of death and dying through this project was very helpful for me on a personal level. What it does for people who watch the piece, I’m a lot less sure of that, but I’m very much looking forward to hearing the responses that we get in Chicago when it’s shown.

OMER FAST

OCTOBER 25, 2008 - JANUARY 3, 2009

In his first Chicago showing, internationally recognized artist Omer Fast presents two video installations in the School of the Art Institute's Rymer Gallery, *The Casting* and the U.S. premiere of *Looking Pretty for God (After GW)*.

The Casting (2007), a four-channel video projection, is based on recorded interviews with a U.S. Army sergeant before his second deployment in Iraq. It weaves together two narratives told to the artist by this young soldier: the story of a destructive love affair in Germany and an accidental killing in Iraq. Near-tableau-vivant portrayals are projected on one side of the two screens, offering what appear to be scenes from the narrative. On the other side are projected documentary-style shots of Fast as interviewer and the soldier as raconteur. *The Casting* was featured in this year's Whitney Biennial for which Omer Fast received the show's highest honor: the 2008 Bucksbaum Award.

The Casting was commissioned by Museum Moderner Kunst (MUMOK), Vienna.

Looking Pretty for God (After GW) created with a team of SAIC alumni, was filmed in Chicago, with audio produced in New York. The piece combines a fictional photo shoot and actual interviews with funeral directors, revealing how their occupation is emblematic of modernity's segregation between work, the worker, and the resulting product as it is subsequently displayed for the public. Thus, Fast references two very distinct industries: mortuary services and commercial photography - each involved in creating image products - and here appearing to merge. Words and images at times coincide as scenes of a photo shoot echo what the interviewees describe: the application of make-up, the proper posing of hands and face, and achieving an ideal facial expression. The child actors sometimes break from their passive on-camera stance and suddenly speak in synch with the voice-over, as if channeling the funeral director's voice. In these short sequences, notions of role-playing, age and identity, performance and spirituality are all brought into question.

Looking Pretty for God (After GW) was co-commissioned by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Manifesta.

Looking Pretty for God (After GW) production credits:

Director of Photography: Peter Biagi

First Assistant Camera: Lori Felker

Second Assistant Camera: Mike Herrera

Gaffer: Westley Gathright

Grips: Graham Mason, Jared Larson, Janina Maria

Sound Recording: Matthew Gill, Mathew Paul Jinks

Location Photography: Jill Frank

Hair/Makeup: Bradley Callahan

Production Manager: Chelsea Tonelli Knight

Production Assistants: Jill Frank, Dara Anne Brady, Maki Terashita, Andrew James

Appearing: Mathew Paul Jinks (Photographer); Gregory Biagi, Nathan Gomez, Marcus Graham, Max Lauser, Giselle Murillo, Elianna Schnittman, and Lawson Connery Sunderland (Models)

Special thanks to: A.A. Rayner & Sons, Modern Funeral Service, Chicago; in New York, Leo F. Kearns Funeral Homes, Colonial Funeral Home, Matthew Funeral Home and Cremation Services, and Greenwich Village Funeral Home.

Cover image: *Looking Pretty for God (After GW)*, 2008, production photograph (detail), single-channel HD video projection with sound. Photo: Jill Frank

Interior image: *Looking Pretty for God (After GW)*, 2008, production photograph, single-channel HD video projection with sound. Photo: Jill Frank



The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

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GALLERIES

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Tuesday - Saturday, 11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.
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37 South Wabash Avenue, Room 220 B
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and Saturday by appointment

Gallery X

280 South Columbus Drive, Room 113
Tuesday - Friday, 12:30 - 5:30 p.m.
and Saturday 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

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