

# MODERN PAINTERS

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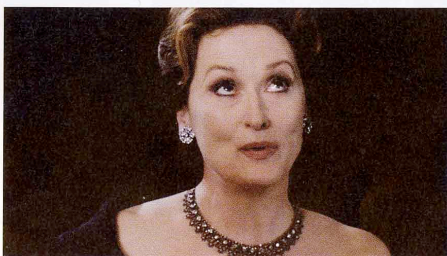
## FILM & VIDEO

Why is it that in **Candice Breitz's** newest video installation, Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson never stop talking? Quinn Latimer visits the artist's studio in Berlin to find out.

# SHE SAID, HE SAID



Composite video stills of *Her*, 2008.



Out of the darkness appears a Rorschach blot of women in manic dialogue with each other. Visible on seven monitors that have been stacked symmetrically, they represent characters who are radically disparate in age and dress: the businesswoman in an '80s pink power suit; the New York therapist with the hefty bohemian necklace; the 19th-century European coquette. They speak in Beckettian fragments—existential, bleak, movingly absurd—that dart in and out of the space like high-strung birds: “So, let me see, who are you? / Who are you? / I am nothing! / Who? / All my life, I’ve, I’ve felt like somebody’s wife, or somebody’s mother, or somebody’s daughter / Who are you?” The collective monologue—which recalls Emily Dickinson’s protofeminist lines “I’m nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody, too?”—is actually delivered by one woman in many guises: the inimitable Meryl Streep.

For the kaleidoscopic *Her* (which spans Streep’s films from 1978 to 2008) and *Him*, a pastiche of snippets from Jack Nicholson’s career, from 1968 to 2008—Johannesburg-born, Berlin-based artist Candice Breitz spent eight months obsessively watching 40 films each by Streep and Nicholson. Taking copious notes on the actors’ mannerisms, speech patterns, and recurrent characterizations, she then edited a selection of those films into brief clips, and wove them into patterns that subsequently related altogether new narratives. Then, Breitz’s postproduction team carefully rotoscoped Streep and Nicholson from their scenes, which spanned movies as various as *Sophie’s Choice* and *Heartburn* to *About Schmidt* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, so that the actors appear like apparitions compulsively emoting against black backgrounds. As Breitz told me when I visited her studio this past November, “The work often flirts with genres like portraiture and biography.”

Liberated from contextual paraphernalia, the fragments that pour from Streep’s and Nicholson’s mouths are dislocated and psychically revealing, allowing Breitz’s narratives to relate the ways in which men and women attempt to form cohesive identities out of the numerous roles they play in life, while negotiating the gender roles society expects them to

play. In *Her*, for example, Streep laments that she is defined by those external to her: a philandering husband, a father, children. In *Him*, by contrast, Nicholson rarely refers to anyone—with the hilarious exception of the memory of a disapproving father—besides himself. His anguish is that he doesn’t

understand himself; hers is that she is not allowed to be herself. “I hoped the work might distill those very differences,” says Breitz, who has long appropriated materials from mass culture—be it the songs of Michael Jackson or the films of Drew Barrymore—for video installations that act as both portrait and mirror, at once performative, political, and thoroughly postmodern. In her two-part video installation *Mother + Father* (2005), for example, she edited parents from popular films—including Faye Dunaway in *Mommy Dearest* and Dustin Hoffman in *Kramer vs. Kramer*—into speeches that illuminate common perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood. Similarly, with *Her* and *Him*, she is shedding light on the “gender codes that operate at an infrastructural level in the world of mass entertainment and, of course, beyond.”

When I asked the artist whether Streep or Nicholson knew about the project, Breitz demurred, and I wondered whether her method of gleaning material from popular culture had ever provoked those from whom she quoted. But Breitz maintains that ultimately, her works are tributes, complicated as they may be. They are also strikingly au courant, considering the similar kind of cultural remixing that regularly occurs on websites like YouTube. As Breitz herself points out, “There is a much broader game of quotation and appropriation going on out there. What I am doing reflects a larger zeitgeist.” ♦

CANDICE BREITZ’S “HER + HIM” WILL MAKE ITS AMERICAN DEBUT THIS MONTH AT YVON LAMBERT, NEW YORK.