

ANNEË OLOFSSON



Fig.114



Fig.115

Figs. 114-15 AnneË Olofsson. Stills from *Evil Eye*, 2005. DVD, color, 10:00 min.

Anne Olofsson's videos and photographic series are haunting *mise-en-scènes* of existential dilemmas that have a universal resonance. Underlying them is the recognition of solitude as a fundamental human condition, and of death as an inevitable truth, which casts life as a lonely journey to one's ultimate demise. In Olofsson's work, this knowledge instills a fear that is the key to unlocking both one's self and the dynamic of relationships, especially familial ones forged in an attempt to overcome this sense of lonely fragility, and expose its psychological, emotional, and physical complexity. Stark in their chiaroscuro rendering and confrontational in nature, her works are like demons let loose, seducing us with their formal rigor, sensual beauty, and dark humor only to attack and undermine our sense of physical and psychological security.

In *Evil Eye*, 2005 (figs. 114–15), this inevitable trajectory toward death is cast as a violent one. The video shows the artist from the collarbone up; we look at Olofsson's shoulders, neck, and head resting on a light-blue fabric, the soft flow of her hair tenderly framing her face. Her eyes are closed, yet she seems to stare at us through facsimile eyes painted on her lids, which, combined with her stillness, gives us the eerie impression that we are looking at a death mask. The artist's image is accompanied by a voiceover in which she recites violent scenarios where an "I" is killed over and over again by different people for different reasons and in different but always horrific ways. Set against the gentle tones of a Bach piano concerto, the neutrality of Olofsson's voice describing murder after murder is all the more unsettling, especially as we can't help but identify the "I" with the artist and imagine her to be the victim of the crimes she describes.

The murders she enumerates all took place in real life; they were gathered and distilled from reports in the *New York Times*, in which they occupy such a common and widespread place these days that they go almost unnoticed. In *Evil Eye* these anonymous deaths are projected onto the artist and come to haunt us as if we were somehow complicit with the murderers, if only through indifference to the victims because they are so numerous. The title of the work encourages this reading: it alludes to the age-old folkloric belief that the misfortune of one can be brought about by the envy of another. What is even more critical here is the superstition that the evil eye can spell its curse unwittingly; we cannot help but wonder if we have unknowingly caused harm by coveting someone else's beauty, health, intellect, or possessions, and whether this is why Olofsson has chosen to ward away harm by painting her eyes to resemble an apotropaic talisman. But just as we have become accustomed to staring at those painted eyes, Olofsson startles us by opening them, her gaze directed steadfastly into the camera and at us. As the off-screen account of her many deaths continues, she seemingly returns from the dead to confront us with our potential guilt as we watch and listen to her live and die at the same time.

In directly addressing the fear and possibility of physical harm, *Evil Eye* relates back to the photographic series *Demons*, 1999 (fig. 34), which was one of Olofsson's earliest pieces to give shape to her own sense of hauntedness. Responding to intense feelings of loneliness and estrangement during a residency in Gdansk, Poland, Olofsson hired a bodyguard for protection. The resulting nine images capture her being followed as she walks down a hallway, stands at a bathroom sink, sleeps in a narrow bed, or goes for a walk in the forest. The scenes are desolate, sinister, cast in darkness with only enough light to reveal the figures. The bodyguard's watchful presence, hovering behind or over her at all times, is highly ambiguous, more menacing than reassuring. In *Demons Sweat Nausea*, 1999, a related seven-hour video shot in a hotel in San Francisco, the guard watches Olofsson as she undresses and goes to sleep. In both pieces, this self-elected invasion of privacy by

Fig. 116



Fig. 116 Anneè Olofsson. Still from *Say Hello Then Wave Goodbye*, 2004. DVD, color, 12:00 min.

Fig. 117 Anneè Olofsson. *The Conversations, Island Life—The Mother*, 2006. C-print mounted on aluminum with a speaker behind the photo, 70 3/4 x 70 3/4 in. (180 x 180 cm)

a complete stranger only adds to a pervasive sensation of potential danger and suggests the futility of Olofsson's attempts to battle her fearful demons.

Evil Eye is even more closely related to *Say Hello Then Wave Goodbye*, 2004 (fig. 116), made a year earlier. In fact, the two read like companion pieces in their formal composition and their foregrounding of physical beauty and its destruction. In this earlier work we see the same view of Olofsson from the collarbone up that we encounter in *Evil Eye*, but it is a white bust, cast in ice, and not her actual body. As we watch, the extremities of her frozen portrait slowly start to darken until the entire bust has turned black and the darkness spreads to the edges of the screen, filling it entirely with her slick, glistening presence. Then the bust's contours begin to disintegrate. Olofsson's features cave in and dissolve into the background, leaving us helplessly contemplating her disintegration to the tunes of Sean McBride until there is nothing left except a black goopy mess, an unwelcome reminder of the base facts of bodily existence.

Say Hello Then Wave Goodbye, in turn, directly relates to a piece that Olofsson had realized in Poland on the shores of the Baltic Sea. *Cold*, 1999 shows the artist facing snow and wind in the nude, resisting the cold as long as is physically possible. In this piece she can also be seen only from the shoulders upward; the focus is on her face, all bodily expression concentrated in her eyes, which blink with increasing fervor as the chill takes hold of her and reduces her to tears. The work is a powerful demonstration of the fact that

Fig 117



Fig 118



resistance to nature is futile. In *Say Hello Then Wave Goodbye*, Olofsson has abandoned such heroics of youth. The cold has taken over, and it is only a question of time until the body gives way to the ultimate fusion with matter.

The Conversations, Island Life—The Mother, 2006 (fig. 117) is a corner installation composed of sound, photographs, and wallpaper depicting a paradisiacal scene. In the photographs, we see Olofsson pressing her ear against a wall that is covered in the same wallpaper, as if she is listening to the sounds emanating from within. Attracted by the snippets of a soft voice mixed with music, chirping birds, and rustling leaves, the viewer is encouraged to eavesdrop. We hear Olofsson's voice reading her mother's words, recorded at her home in southern Sweden. Living alone, the mother talks to her cat as she goes about her daily domestic routine. Mixed in with Olofsson's voice are parts of the original recording, love songs by Charles Aznavour and other favorite music that Olofsson grew up with in her parents' house, as well as ambient noises suggesting a natural setting akin to the scenery of the wallpaper. Asked to assume the same position as Olofsson in the photographs, and effectively enacting the image, we become acutely aware of the intrusive nature of the piece as well as our attempts to grasp it. To understand the work, we must participate in a voyeuristic breach of privacy, which becomes more uncomfortable once we realize that our curiosity has driven us to witness the musings of a person filling her solitude. We have bought into the wallpaper motif's false promise of paradise, but instead of entering greener pastures, we have been seduced into contemplating one of our greatest fears: facing the end alone.

This work is the companion piece to *The Conversations, Grande Corniche—The Dealer*, 2006 (fig. 118), where we take part in a break-up. Again, the work pulls us in with a false lure—a wallpaper depicting a beautiful Italianate palace façade—only to ultimately nourish our fears of abandonment. We hear a recorded conversation between the artist and her dealer, but since no names or any other specifics are provided, we are left to revisit and fill in our own failed relationships as we witness this one unravel.

In their use of decorative wallpaper both *The Conversation Island Life—The Mother* and *The Conversation Grande Corniche—The Dealer* invoke Olofsson's photographic series, *God Bless the Absentees*, 2000, which explores the notion of isolation and loss of identity within the domestic realm. Here, her subjects wear clothing made from the same fabric that upholsters their homes; as they blend in with their carpets, couches, or beds, they literally become part of the furniture, unnoticed and frozen in their isolation without even a cat to talk to.

Olofsson herself is the primary subject of her work, complemented by a tight roster of family and friends, most frequently her parents. They divorced at around the time when Olofsson began integrating them in her work, but their willing participation for over a decade in her disquieting, potentially embarrassing and awkward scenarios probes and exposes personal familial dynamics, notably manifestations of continuity and change in the relationship between parent and child. Olofsson's secret eavesdropping on her mother's loneliness in *The Conversation Island Life—The Mother*, is, unlike ours, motivated not so much by curiosity as by concern. In this context it illustrates the ultimate helplessness of a daughter faced with an aging parent and her inability to change that fate. In the end she, too, finds herself excluded and alone. c. s.

Fig. 118 Anneb Olofsson. *The Conversations, Grand Corniche—The Dealer*, 2006. C-print mounted on aluminum with a speaker behind the photo, 70 3/4 x 70 3/4 in. (180 x 180 cm)