

Art in America

Now Playing: An Interview with Dara Friedman



In *PLAY* (2013), Dara Friedman's new film and video work, now on view at New York gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise, a cast of 32 often naked actors perform 17 vignettes about intimacy, fantasy and pleasure in keys ranging from gauzily idyllic to mildly violent. Many are frankly if playfully sexual, including the opening segment, in which a male yoga teacher discusses "raping bear pose" with a young woman. He then stands with her on stage as she aggressively strips to excerpts from Sergei Prokofiev's "Cinderella" score, disrobes himself and chases her around the empty theater, smiling and panting. Friedman can be heard in the background giving a cue as the instructor presses his student against a glass wall: "eye contact."

Made in two parts, shown sequentially here on two adjacent walls, *PLAY* is being exhibited in its entirety for the first time in a gallery setting. The 45-minute work was shot in color and black-and-white during Friedman's residency at the Hammer Museum at UCLA, where it premiered. Using improvisational theater games and dialogue, Friedman co-created the settings with the actors, for whom she tailored her script. At Gavin Brown, *PLAY* appears alongside new works by New-York based artist Alex Katz (through Feb. 22).

German-born, Miami-based Friedman, 45, plumbs questions of connection, exposure and vulnerability in these variously intense, silly and searing scenes. She met with *A.i.A.* at the gallery to talk about her inspirations, which range from Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) to artist Wallace Berman and the Semina group, the importance of play and why she likes her actors nude.

TRACY ZWICK Is the title *PLAY* meant to be descriptive, allusive, directive, a combination or something else altogether? Is it a play on the word "play"?

DARA FRIEDMAN Yes, it's a word play for sure. Kids learn by playing, though as adults we frequently stop engaging in this process and that's stupid. The playing and learning can continue.

ZWICK But the actors all appear quite young, from their late teens to late 20s. Did you not mean to imply that youth is the principal time in one's life for play?

FRIEDMAN That's who turned up at the call. I didn't impose any age restriction. You're allowed to go at it hard on the playground and on the stage; these are areas where that's the business of the moment. The title really could have been *GAME* because you have to be game, you have to be extremely open to play in this serious way and these actors were game.

ZWICK You shot *PLAY* in two separate parts. Why?

FRIEDMAN It's really 17 films in one. Each scene was co-created with the actors and it was intense creatively and technically; I needed to take a breath. We shot with two cameras, one HD and a modified Super 8, which have very different qualities. The Super 8 is very pencil-y and smudged and you can see all the eraser marks. I wanted the audience to be privy to the erasures and have an understanding of how this was made. That's also why the audio is at times asynchronous. It's not a narrative film; it's an artwork. Sometimes you connect and sometimes you're out of sync, but you can often still understand each other.

ZWICK In one vignette a character talks about the sadness of missed opportunities for honesty and connection. Is this an overarching theme?

FRIEDMAN Connection is the key. The kernel of the idea was just putting your arm around somebody and just starting from there. What does that mean? It is a physical connection; it's an emotional connection; it's very powerful and kind and possessive. What links the vignettes, not to be too corny about it, is the fact that we are all connected in a larger sense.

ZWICK What is your connection with Alex Katz? What inspired this joint show?

FRIEDMAN We share a dealer, Gavin Brown, and it was Gavin's idea. The cut-outs of couples Katz has done for this show make a proscenium arch for my work. It makes it really clear that what I'm doing is portraiture as well. Gavin thought we were oddly similar.

ZWICK Repetition pervades this work, as in variations on a theme. Are you emphasizing commonality?

FRIEDMAN All of these characters are planets unto themselves and that's what they have in common. They are all becoming, all asking, "What will happen with me? Where will I connect? Who will grab my hand?"

ZWICK Almost everyone either starts out or gets naked in *PLAY*. Why is that important?

FRIEDMAN I wanted to start really simply, as if with a blank canvas or a plank of wood. People are often at their most vulnerable when they are exposed. It's a time when you are trusting and truthful and that's really nice. Plus these actors are all gorgeous! And I do like to take a look.