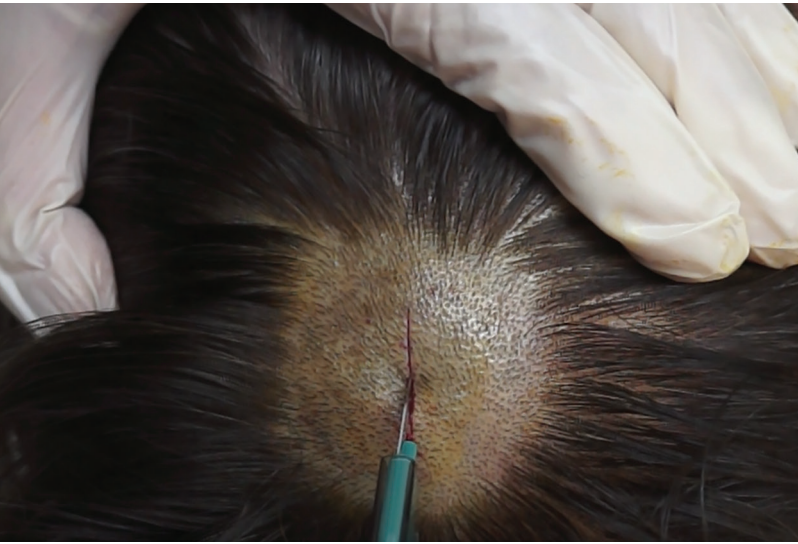


S O T D

STRANGELY ORDINARY THIS DEVOTION



(SOTD) Strangely Ordinary This Devotion was birthed out of a desire to privilege and amplify the strange and banal quality of daily life, to see what it can yield as an entrance to larger concerns, such as the environment, representation of motherhood, queer desire, and the domestic as site of radicality. The current cut is 27 minutes long and will premier at the 2017 Whitney Biennial this April.

The following pages are the culmination of conversations between artists Dani Leventhal and Sheilah Wilson with writer Sarah Hollenberg. The invitation to write for the new Studio section of *Blackflash* forced us to think about the relationship between image and text in new ways. We experimented with different approaches to the conversation over the course of the last five months. Ultimately, we chose a call and response method, each selecting stills from the video to act as catalysts for our texts. This exercise resulted in passages that speak to formal elements, personal memories, or the still as it exists in relation to the film itself. Eventually, we structured the article into four categories: Found, Constructed, Blood and Water. Lastly, we asked ourselves the questions: What remains? What is the afterimage of *SOTD*?

This spontaneous approach to writing generated texts that echo the video, which operates through various registers. These include: rituals to protect children from the coming water crisis, historical and pop culture homage, archetypal embodiment through materials, the domestic space within our own family and inhabitation of fantasy. In the video's fragmentation, there is a building of meaning and sense. Similarly, this article accrues meaning through personal and critical, responses, words and image to move towards a new kind of articulation.



FOUND

DL: Last June I fell harder for Sheilah when she told me the story of her bike accident. She was 17, her gym bag got caught in the spokes, and she went down hard on her face. Teeth came out and her jaw broke. For weeks she lay in the hospital bed, then walked around feeling like Frankenstein. This story pushed me past adoration of her into compassion for her. I consider this a ‘found’ shot because it was not planned and I would not have run for the camera if flossing had no resonance.

SW: This shot comes directly after Chantal Akerman’s sequence from *Je Tu Il Elle*, where Akerman observes a man shaving in the mirror of a bathroom. Now it is Dani observing me in the bathroom. The shot is formal and banal, held by the lines coming out from the dental floss, an unexpected mooring through the implanted teeth. It’s interesting to use what was once my deformity and experience of shame as source for imagery. No longer at the mercy of the wound.

SH: I read this in three directions. First, it is a common representation of domesticity and intimacy. As in the shot that precedes it, its significance is shaped by the observer’s intrusion into the private space of the bathroom, transforming it into a performative toilette. Second, it joins a number of passages in the video that open the mouth and invite us to enter, white teeth as gateway (I’m thinking here of stones placed in Dani’s mouth, or Sheilah’s mouth careening toward the camera as she straddles Dani in the second sex scene). Finally, it echoes a series of images throughout the video in which something cuts or slices into some giving surface (Dani’s surgery, holes dug in dirt, the photograph of a chain running down through a woman’s labia in *Linguistic Hardcore*).

DL: This location was planned. We booked a cabin at The Susan B. Anthony Memorial Womyn’s Land Trust in southern Ohio because we figured our narrative could expand there. We ‘found’ this shot the first afternoon. The heat called for swimming, so we went down to the pond. Jumping off the dock together was a blast. Sheilah grabbed the camera and this shot wound up in the video. Is it a worthy shot? An expression of love? Another acknowledgement of precious water? An investigation of age forming bodies? Did we transform this ‘home movie’ enough to make it function as art?

SW: The ‘home movie’ footage acts as an important incubation/birthing site from which other fictions arise. Remember how we started to walk around naked immediately after we arrived? It was a hot day, but we also felt very safe. We knew that all the land around us was owned by women. We knew we wouldn’t be bothered. We wanted to go there to experience that kind of radical environment, to see what would happen with the work. So, although you are categorizing this as ‘found’, maybe everything we are doing is constructed to a greater or lesser degree? For instance, in the next sequence, we are eating our dinner and Rose tells a story of a witch who destroys the world. She uses a loud voice and makes large gestures with her hands. It has this quality of being in between worlds, the place where, if given space, fantasy arises from domestic life.

SH: All this time, I’ve been thinking that this is where you live. It never occurred to me, watching the video, that it could be anywhere but home. The phrase, “feral domesticity,” which you introduced into our dialogue early on, has been attached for me, to this place, and this sequence. In class yesterday, we spoke about Mapplethorpe’s portrait of Jesse McBride and the controversy that surrounded it. One student pointed out how rarely we encounter representations of naked bodies that aren’t sexualized, so that it is an almost automatic response to equate nakedness with sex (rather than comfort, freedom, familiarity, trust). Which is to say that this is absolutely a worthy shot, because it is, first, more beautiful than you let on when you frame it as accidental, and second because it finds and gives form to a kind of intimacy, a way of being, that is ordinary and ancient (when have we not walked into water, children clinging to our backs, slippery and delighted?) and yet almost entirely invisible. Here are my original notes describing this passage: “Lake. Dani naked with Rose also naked on her back jump into the lake. Towel wrapping. Sheilah in underpants getting stuff from fridge. Feral domesticity. Peeling bbq’d corn, half burnt. Naked Rose singing song about a powerful witch who wants to destroy the world. (end of the world).”



CONSTRUCTED

SW: We planned this scene to experience fight energy/contact between our bodies. When we first showed it to a friend the immediate question was ‘why were you fighting?’ I forgot that to participate in the archetype of the fight, there is also an implicit need, on the part of the viewer, for rationale. Later, Dani and I decided that the fight scene would come after the trapeze shot, which was a moment of emotional infidelity. As our actor Dan Jain and I slowly spun on the trapeze, we gazed into each others eyes. It was the intensity of our gaze that was the betrayal. This became the rationale for the fight. Yet there is still no establishing of winner and loser or adherence to recognizable narrative arc. Ultimately, we allow ourselves to engage the trope of violence and permission to create it in our own image.

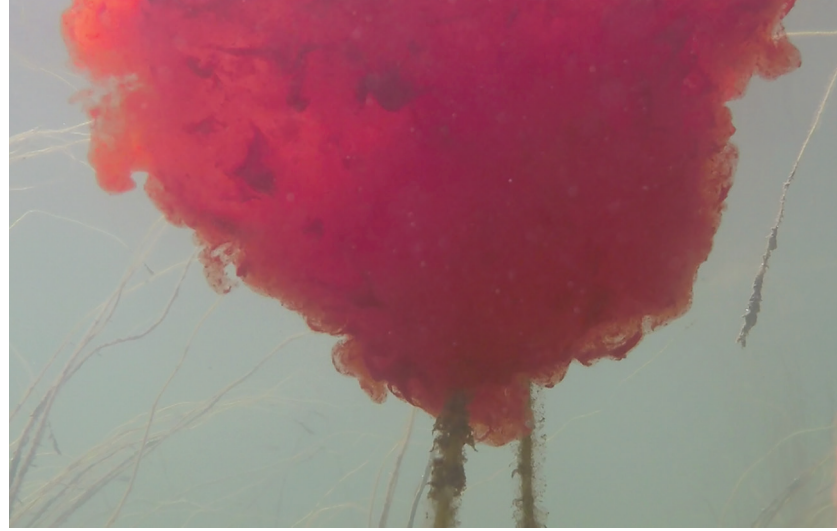
DL: In 2006 Jennifer Montgomery asked me to play the rapist in her video *Deliver*, a remake using an all-female cast, of John Boorman’s 1972 cult classic *Deliverance*. My first response was NO! I told her this idea was not good for women but 6 months later I was in the woods tying Jackie Goss to a tree and pulling down her jeans. Jennifer told me how important it is to break the stereotype of women as people who process everything with words. I guess that’s why I didn’t hesitate to fight on camera with Sheilah. I still have questions about what is good or bad for the representation of women, but what I do know is that I want to follow my desires. Also, when Sheilah put the *Kill Bill* soundtrack to it, I laughed so hard I fell off my chair. When we edit, we know to keep a shot when it continues to hold our attention. I have no doubt about including this scene.

SH: The form of this delights me. The violence is so clearly artificial, so cavalier in its construction of the image of hurt, and yet the scene is so carefully built. The borrowed soundtrack amplifies this contradiction. It is funny, but it also makes me sad. It is all the ways we make violence sexy, and it throws the petty irritable miseries of ordinary conflicts into such sharp relief. Everyday conflicts are so boring, so perpetual compared to a bloody throwdown, but if we’re lucky (like, really lucky), a fight over dinner—the one we’ve had a dozen times before—with no blows thrown, is exactly the kind of conflict we get. I don’t know if I agree about the need for motivation in this case. It operates as a sort of catharsis, an exaggeration and fictionalization of the conflicts that emerge out of intimacy.

SW: Here I am as a constructed character with a red wig. Speaking French. Wanting information. I experienced the scene as a character. When you push me off and reject my advance, I roll to the side. My hand clenches unconsciously into a fist. This action becomes a marker of failed intimacy. It reminds me of the craving(s) for closeness and inevitable failure(s) of sharing one’s self with another. The fist reveals the way my body memory comes into play. Even as a character I reveal true elements of myself. The clench of the fist makes me think of the base human need for contact. In this scene, I am asking Dani about survival of children who do not need water, but what I am displaying through my body is desire for connection. Survival post apocalypse never talks about the emotional needs for continuation; it is all about storing food, water and weapons.

DL: You have made a beautiful case, like Chris Marker did in *La Jetée*. The only way the scientists could get the subject to time travel, was to go through the channels of his heart. It is love that drives him and allows him to access survival for the world. Love and survival through environmental catastrophe are aspirations in our video, too. In this shot, you are preparing for the global water crisis as it becomes more acute. Your character tries, with the power of seduction, to get us to perform the magic on your fetus.

SH: The strange baptismal scene that precedes this one, in which first Rose then Sheilah hold their heads under water in an indoor kiddie pool, reminds me how consistently developments in both faith and in technology are responses to need. Whether our tools are magic or machine, they announce our desperations. I grew up reading a lot of feminist science fiction, with which my mother’s shelves were well stocked. Octavia E. Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, Johanna Russ... While much of what appeals to me in your video is its combination of intimacy and a sort of material poetics, this story of the creation of drought-proof children tugs on a particular, pre-art world, pre-academic thing in me—it points back toward an adolescent flowering different (if not disconnected) from puberty. These books challenged my understanding of what it means to be human, to be gendered, to be moral, to be a member of a family or a community, at a key moment in my life. I’ve had an eye peeled for such challenges—those that denaturalize my reality, that insist I consider other ways to be human—ever since. The more comfortable I become in this world, the harder they are to find.



BLOOD

SH: In the preceding scene, gloved hands use a scalpel to cut into a swelling in Dani's scalp, to allow the release of whatever abject stuff lies just beneath the surface. Here, Sheilah and two other women dig a plant out of dusty soil, in the midst of roadside weeds, and they place a stone in the hollow left behind. When one empties a glass vial of blood over the stone, there is a transubstantiation. The stone becomes an organ, something spongy, pulsing, and alive. The stone becomes whatever unseen tissue lay beneath the surface of Dani's scalp, and the surgery is reframed as a harvesting. It is matter from a human body, and it is a seed, and it is just a stone to be buried.

SW: I like the way you talk about the indeterminate nature of the materials. We tell Rose that the blood is food coloring. It tastes like mint. Yesterday we had to add water because it was getting too gelatinous.... Its physical qualities catch on the archetypal notions of blood, holding it into a recognizable shape for the viewer and even for us. In this scene I felt it transform. The silence of our ceremony, the lack of language and communication had a weirdly unpredicted effect on me. As we dug up the flower, I had a flashback to when my younger sister was born at our home in Nova Scotia. It was the dead of winter; my brothers and I went out in the freezing cold and transferred her placenta from an aluminum mixing bowl into a hole in the earth. It was so hard to dig the frozen ground. I'll never forget the extremes between the warmth in the bowl and the coldness everywhere else.

DL: For me the use of blood is to literally bring the inside to the outside. I find fascinating the fact that blood is blue until it's out. I knew Sheilah wanted that flower in the alley. Everytime we walked past it in June and July she said she wanted to take it home. By the time we took it, in August, it looked like a weed. I didn't know her associations to the placenta. I was tied to the dryness of the dirt, then to the wet redness. Another anecdote is that we cast this shot with an older woman who is taller than Sheilah and has huge hands. At the last minute she bailed because she couldn't separate blood from violence, something she wanted nothing to do with.

SH: A number of scenes in the video are shot under water; most of them focus on the balletic, almost weightless elegance of submerged bodies, the close sound of water pressing against ears. In this one, the camera floats alone through silent swaying stalks of plants, until a bloom of blood hits the water from above. It expands like an explosion in slow motion, cloud-like billows rushing out to become water, redness fading into pink-orange. As it grows less opaque, small clumps twist through the water, aimless until they catch in the fuzzy surface of the plants, clinging like it's a survival.

SW: This is such a beauty shot to me. Like a color field explosion painting. Everything that could be violent is tamed by the water. Terror outweighed by beauty. Unlike later scenes where the blood is more blatantly gruesome, such as thrown onto the rock in midday, coming from inside me through my mouth, this one holds it firmly in beauty. The seaweed we had been avoiding walking in is suddenly a soft fuzzy cilia, becoming the inside of the body. Strangely comforting. Yet I am also thinking of the early days of testing the nuclear bombs, and how they would invite people to come watch and take photographs of the beautiful shapes and cloudlike formations.

DL: I'm interested in disaster porn. Are we doing that? Is it ok to do that?



WATER

SH: We are half water. Sacks of it in tender casing, wrapped around bone. This passage, at night, centered on the bright white illuminating light, is uncomfortable. A strong hand, pink and white, long fingers, grasps tender thighflesh, over and over, squeezing hard, tugging. Water, bubbling, washing, glugging, soft, is the only sound, and it rushes over this rough handling, insisting that the body is fluid, it can take any shape, just pull harder.

DL: My hands did sculpture before video, and they have retained muscle memory. Sometimes Sheilah's body becomes a material. In this scene we romped under mosquito netting in the excruciating heat of northern Nicaragua. Back in Ohio we came down with dengue fever, which translates as "broken bone" fever. Our bodies were completely incapacitated, and we could barely walk.

SW: It is amazing what the body does out of need, out of pleasure. How we are so malleable. I explained to Rose the other day how a baby exits a body and was reminded how implausible it all is, and yet it is the most natural and timeless event. Maybe it is only as implausible as what we do to ourselves later, in pursuit of beauty or body alteration. Maybe none of it should be surprising. Just so many ways to push and modify the container we are held in.

SH: Water, pouring onto the lens of the camera, looks like static, like a bad television picture, a signal gone awry. Before its picture became pixels fixed securely in place, the image on the screen was a line that ran too fast to catch, zipping electronic translation onto glass. Like water, electrons are intransigent; they don't want to be held in place. When they broke the banks of their electronic gutter, the picture would shift off track, twist, become unreadable. It looked like this. We'd play with the rabbit ears, listening carefully, to keep track of what we could not see. Water is disorderly and formless. The children who surface here and there throughout the video's narrative, those who live without water, children engineered or conjured to survive the coming drought, will they, I wonder, be more disciplined, more ordered, without this lawless stuff inside them?

DL: I doubt there will be more order and discipline - because the social/political landscape will be so corrupted at that point that the children will not be able to quiet down.

SW: I think I could only believe in a better disciplined society if it also had the disorderly present in equal portions. Otherwise I get nervous. But what you both do is bring us towards the question of what sort of human (or is it even human) can survive in the future: Disciplined? Lawless? Dani just finished reading *Lord of the Flies*; a scenario where disorder would win, except that the navy (representative of our military industrial complex) arrives to right the chaos at the last instant. On another level your answers make me think about the question of the environmental crises. Just the other day I overheard a conversation where the person was talking about how we keep waiting for this dire environmental moment. But in actuality, it has already arrived. We have failed, as of yet, to do anything, on the scale that is necessary. It is like Margaret Atwood says in *Oryx and Crake*, "He doesn't know which is worse, a past he can't regain or a present that will destroy him if he looks at it too clearly. Then there's the future. Sheer vertigo."



SOTD AFTERIMAGE

SW: What I take away is the awareness of the domestic as a place of invention. This is reassuring. The mythology of the solitary artist toiling in the studio, waiting for inspiration ‘away from the madding crowd’, is pervasive. The opening up of the messy and chaotic domestic—as site for creation and material collection—is liberating. I also feel deeply satisfied by seeing visual representation of queer love and desire. I have long yearned for imagery that I could identify with. This is a political engagement for the work; to show our own bodies caring, feeding, tending, fucking, inventing..... it feels risky but worth it.

DL: Questions that remain for me revolve around the nature of my own devotions, creating unpredictable narrative and just how to collaborate. All of these things continue to shift after rupture and failure. I don’t feel finished. I recognize that we are “standing on the shoulders of giants.” We have ripped footage and sound and stood in others’ sacred locations to make our work, and we want it to read as homage. We are trying to tell Chantal Ackerman, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Patti Smith, Quentin Tarantino, Prince, Susan B. Anthony and Robert Smithson, thank you.

SH: I return, as I have at a number of points during our exchange, to the formal and material attributes of the work. The entanglements and friction between inside and outside; fluid, sticky, and dry; clear and opaque; fissure, slice, and hole—all are essential to the structure of the work and responsible for its poetry. To acknowledge these qualities is to pay due respect (as you have offered to the personal and the ancestral). At the same time, I fear formalism is a protection from the intimacy of the work, its deeply personal exposures. Of my turn to form, I accuse myself: “You learned this trick from the patriarchy.” As if form were not ours too, as if stories could be told without it. This exchange has asked that I sacrifice the objectivity of the lectern, the impersonality of the scholarly text. I wish art would make such demands more often.