

Kathryn Cornelius is perhaps best known for performances that simulate real art world events. For the Washington, D.C.-based artist, art fairs provide an irresistible backdrop on which to project ridiculous yet plausible fictions. At Scope Miami in 2006, she presented herself as a masseuse, offering aromatherapy and an iPod full of affirmations at discount rates; at this year's artDC fair, she performed *Recognition*, a faux red carpet event during which Cornelius appeared on a large screen in a succession of costumes, playing the parts of various shopworn stereotypes of woman artists. Her work is humorous, but also dark—since it sometimes depends on people who are uncertain as to whether or not they're being mocked.

In *Common Ground*, her first one-woman show at Curator's Office, Cornelius's dark humor remains evident, as does her enthusiasm for absurd or self-defeating gestures. But in this exhibition she leaves behind her critique of gallery culture feeding frenzies. Instead, she ventures off the grid and into the wilderness. In the videos and photographs presented here, Cornelius invents a different sort of persona, one that is lost somewhere in the natural landscape or in the void of an accelerated digital age. In these pieces, Cornelius appears silent, collected—ready, perhaps, to disappear from the world altogether.

Cornelius uses performance, photography and video almost interchangeably, not committing herself to any one way of operating. She tends to favor low tech, readily available, consumer-friendly formats: The show's titular video, for example, is available for sale as an mp4. Much of the work in *Common Ground* relates directly to her daily life—her intimate engagements with technology, place, and spirituality.

In the photographic series, *Reach*, Cornelius wanders through lush, rain-damp woods, clutching a can phone—that old improvised children's toy in which string carries sound vibrations between two tin cans, each of which acts as both transmitter and receiver. She alternately appears either yelling into one end of the device, or intently holding it to her ear, listening, all the while dragging the other end through the underbrush. Here Cornelius mimics a typical cell phone user, completely disengaged from her surroundings while rapt in what appears like a one-sided conversation. Yet Cornelius is ironically trying—and failing—to use this device to connect directly with nature itself.

Cornelius creates photographic diptychs, pairing images that differ from one another only slightly. These could read as successive film stills—a black border definitively separates one image from the next. But when she pairs photos, Cornelius typically reverses one, as in *Reach #4*, so that the two become mirror images. Instead of a linear narrative, the reversed image sets up an abstracted, circular relation. This distracts the viewer from definite spans of time or events; the performance is accordingly not about endurance or duration—as performance so often is—but about an elusive state of being.

From the forest, Cornelius moves to sheets of ice and rock in near-perpetual darkness. The photos that comprise *Hidden World* were taken in Iceland in November, a time of year when the sun is only visible for a scant few hours each day. Living with constant darkness at one point in the year and constant daylight at another might explain all sorts of cultural quirks—including, say, a pervasive belief in *huldufolk*—hidden spirits. Many of Iceland's citizens honestly believe that the strange piles of stones dotting the landscape are evidence of little supernatural beings, and local folklore demands that these markers remain undisturbed.

In *Hidden World*, the artist attempts to blend in with these irregular stone heaps; she appears as a tiny silhouette, bundled against the cold and comparatively diminished against the vast alien spaces enfolding her. These are undeniably arresting images, yet their underlying concept is curious, if not downright absurd: The artist is essentially chasing after elves. But the *huldufolk* provide an apt metaphor for Cornelius's distrust of vision as our privileged means for gaining—or constructing—knowledge of the world.

This strange place—between seeing and knowing, belief and skepticism—is the kind of territory Cornelius calls home. By entertaining insupportable expressions of mystery, Cornelius isn't simply making winking asides—saying things she doesn't actually believe just for the pleasure of exploding their implausibility. She uses loaded or even stereotyped imagery to expose the limits of human senses and consciousness, with the less than pedestrian aim of perhaps one day transcending them.

And so it is that her video *Return* appears both transcendent and foolish simultaneously: Cornelius emerges from darkness; she is blindfolded and wearing a white robe, and assumes a Christ-like pose. As the camera zooms out, it becomes evident that she is walking backwards—on a treadmill. She holds her head high and her arms aloft; a meditative state is married to yuppie gym equipment.

As the video ends, a landscape element enters: footage of moonlight glinting across water is superimposed over the artist's feet; she appears to glide backwards over lapping waves. Throughout the piece, the artist remains stoic, projecting only wordless determination and stillness. Here Cornelius gives new meaning to the phrase "working out religiously"—perhaps presenting it as a sad little vestige of ritual and faith in a secular culture.

Landscape in the video *Common Ground (version 1.0)* is not just the main character, it's the only one—Cornelius remains behind the camera throughout. Footage of ducks swimming, bonfires burning, and stones skipping has been shaped into 21 separate triptychs, all prosaic portraits of the natural world. The dynamism of the triptychs is weirdly offset by the banality of the images: Although the artist has personally gathered the footage, the subjects are so familiar as to defy emotional investment.

As if to confirm the images' lack of authentic power, Cornelius provides redundant captions. Ducks appear; the text reads: "[QUACK...QUACK...]"; "[CRACKLE, CRACKLE]" goes the fire. Cornelius is not just interested in the limits of vision but of language as well: Rather than offering mastery and understanding, the act of naming things here pushes them still further away, and the words themselves become a vast sort of ontological emptiness.

Cornelius genuinely loves the landscape and the infinite; at the same time, in her art, she seems to admit her powerlessness to find adequate expressions for them. Instead of grasping after some new representation of the sublime, Cornelius juxtaposes nearly dead ideas, symbols so drained of currency or vitality that they have gone beyond being mere clichés—to become striking manifestations of human failure to genuinely connect with something greater than ourselves.

Unlike the witty chatter of her art world pieces, then, the works in *Common Ground* are personal, reserved, and affectingly austere. Taken together, these two disparate bodies of work show an artist with a profound sense of her inner and social selves—even if she expresses that understanding with unlikely means. Cornelius deliberately employs images that, by rights, ought to be used up and devoid of power; the results are paradoxically powerful.

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