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WHITE FLAG LIBRARY

*Davina Semo*

March 16 – April 24, 2013



A question arises from looking at the titles of Davina Semo's work: who's speaking? The three works presented at White Flag Library offer a concise example of a particular, if not also diverse voice evident throughout the artist's work: *THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXHILARATING THAN TRUSTING A STRANGER WITH WHOM YOU HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON* (2013), *IN SOME MOMENTS SHE SEEMED LIKE A PERSON WITH NO PRIOR LIFE* (2013), and *MOMMA ALWAYS TOLD ME GIRL COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS* (2013). Appearing as excerpts, they may not necessarily tell a complete story, but through their capitalization – the titles are as typographically declarative as the sentiments they portray – and their mixed perspectives and pronouns, each title encapsulates a narrative, deploying grammatical subtlety on a melodramatic scale. And though the narrator (or subject) is unclear, an attitude remains consistent, implicating the works and by association, our experience of them, in dangerous, psychological, or threatening fictions, cinematically or theatrically reverberating in the gallery space.

Leaning against a bookshelf, *THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXHILARATING THAN TRUSTING A STRANGER WITH WHOM YOU HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON* is a triptych of three concrete slabs that stand just below the hip. The concrete's presence is immediate. And, with broken safety glass embedded in its surface, additionally marked by Day-Glo orange cross hatches underneath the glass, the entire face that is not leaning against a wall is at once crystalline smooth and threateningly jagged. Like marks that city workers use to warn of a buried pipe or a damaged section of street, the X's chromatically site the work, amplifying the objects' dramatic and menacing presence. Yet these are industrial and common things, and the title asks the materials to perform their associated histories through the restrained and poetic formalism of their surfaces, textures, fractures, and placement. Through its intense proximity, *THERE IS NOTHING...* dominates an entire wall, and as each slab leans there, it de-neutralizes the exhibition space, and a psychological power play occurs, asserting the objects' substantive presence (perhaps the title's stranger with whom we have nothing in common) against our own bodies, and the unwitting catharsis of releasing ourselves to such a brazen encounter.

Semo's titles are often appropriated from other sources. Overheard conversations, song lyrics, quotations from books: declarative, ironic, desultory, occasionally perverse, and direct, these are the linguistic materials that Semo aggrandizes by the same logic of a New York Post headline. For *IN SOME MOMENTS SHE SEEMED LIKE A PERSON WITH NO PRIOR LIFE*, the title implies an alienation from a personal narrative capacity for the subject to self-identify. Originally meant to be suspended, instead it rests on the floor, two eight-inch cylinders connected by a piece of graphite treated chain. It hides in the corner. The numerous chain links emphasize the cylinders' stationary inertia, though the two concrete forms largely eclipse its drooping line. It is a process of assertion and denial, and paired with the title, we can see the work as a narrative depicting the tension between an object and movement: the inert masses refuse the chain's flexibility, and the chain, tying the two forms together, inflects the sculpture with a formal economy of bondage and self-possession – ironic, however, in its modest scale. It is no longer a subject defined by grace, but of release, liberated only by extreme force, as it would be required to rend the cylinders apart.

It is important to understand Semo's use of narrative and theatricality as a critical departure from mid-century minimalism. Similarly, she utilizes industrial materials in formal configurations that might resemble Richard Tuttle or Fred Sandback line drawings or sculptures, Donald Judd wall reliefs, Ellsworth Kelly shaped canvases, or Carl Andre floor sculptures. Many of these artists sought to oppose narrative illusionism with a highly rationalized abstraction of space and form. While Semo's work may sometimes allude to minimalism – grids, repetition, physicality, abrupt perceptibility, reductive formal vocabularies – she humorously and aggressively plays with this language of rationality, analyzing a particular subjectivity – experiences, histories, sexualities, and ideologies that comprise an attitude – through the materials' cracked histories. Semo's formalism negates the positivity of industrial rationality, and supplants it through narration with the incongruities and contradictions of her subjects.

It may be more interesting to think of Semo's work and materials in terms of campy cinematic attempts at simulated violence (primary examples include low-budget cult films such as *Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *Escape From New York*, *They Live*, *Dead Alive*, and *The Evil Dead*), wherein it is obvious that blood is no more than dyed corn syrup or milk, disemboweled guts are sausages, and skin ripped, cut, or exploded is latex. With these materials, we have a direct association: they are common and cheap goods, we have a practical history with them, some are nourishing, and we've likely touched all of them. They are also sexless, lifeless, and yet retain some eroticized relationship to the body and we can see in these special effects the same visceral or gross sensations we've personally had with the materials themselves (think primarily about the texture of latex). So, too, can Semo's work be read in terms of her more theatrical use of industrial materials: we walk on sidewalks, lock our bikes with chains. These materials create a tension, both of what we cannot possess (generally speaking, sidewalks and buildings) and what we forcibly do (the chain locking gates or bicycles), a tension mounted between public and private selves and the way these materials inscribe or enforce those situations.

In *MOMMA ALWAYS TOLD ME GIRL COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS*, a roughly five foot by five foot square of zinc plated steel chain hangs against the wall. Each of the fifty-eight lengths of chain is vertically suspended from single nails set at eye level. Unevenly treated, industrially manufactured, the work glows with the gold of the zinc plating, and, shifting in saturation with each change in perspective, the texture of the composition becomes at once one of strain and grace, the smooth curves of each link building into a more aggressive, though slightly less blunt rigidity. The chain's form is a product of the rationality of its manufacture and purpose – its appearance, gold from the zinc plating, originates from protective, rather than aesthetic utility. This is not the only story to tell, however, nor its only use, and this mutability, and Semo's tender respect for the chains orchestrates a palpable experience redolent of the acrid, metallic smell released by certain metals when they are handled by and react to bare skin. The title's ironically demur tone completes this story of transference, that denied their industrial potential, released from the extreme force of which they are ordinarily the subject, the chains occupy an existential position from which they must carry only the burden of their own weight. And, organized as a square, *MOMMA ALWAYS TOLD ME...* testifies to the continual self-bondage necessary to sustain this force, as well as that which gives the work, and thereby its subject, form.

Who is speaking? Who populates these works? In a sense, it could be seen that the materials themselves populate the sculptures and wall drawing, and that they speak their own narratives through a reconfiguration and formalization of their charged associations and discrete histories – that which gives them both a physical and metaphorical texture. And yet, the works, in all their violent presence may need some dominator still, someone to pull on their chains, tie them up, to participate in the melodrama of bodies moving between public and private spaces – and this might be the subject that speaks, the attitude waiting to be conveyed, the raw emotional potential to which they are beholden and by which they are beheld.





The government shut down the free library program, and Mr. Malamud feared that legal trouble might follow even though he felt they had violated no laws. As he recalled in a newspaper account, "I immediately saw the potential for overreaction by the courts." He recalled telling Mr. Swartz: "You need to talk to a lawyer. I need to talk to a lawyer."

Mr. Swartz recalled in a 2009 interview, "I had this vision of the feds crashing down the door, taking everything away." He said he locked the deadbolt on his door, lay down on the bed for a while and then called his mother.

The federal government investigated but did not prosecute.

In 2011, however, Mr. Swartz went beyond that, according to a federal indictment. In an effort to provide free public access to JSTOR, he broke into computer networks at M.I.T. by means that included gaining entry to a utility closet on campus and leaving a laptop that signed into the university network under a false account, federal officials said.

Mr. Swartz turned over his hard drives with 4.8 million documents, and JSTOR declined to pursue the case. But Carmen M. Ortiz, a United States attorney, pressed on, saying that "stealing is stealing, whether you use a computer command or a crowbar, and whether you take documents, data or dollars."

Founded in 1995, JSTOR, or Journal Storage, is nonprofit, but institutions can pay tens of thousands of dollars for a subscription that bundles scholarly publications online. JSTOR says it needs the money to collect and to distribute the material and, in some cases, subsidize institutions that cannot afford it. On Wednesday, JSTOR announced that it would open its archives for 1,200 journals to free reading by the public on a limited basis.

Mr. Malamud said that while he did not approve of Mr. Swartz's actions at M.I.T., "access to knowledge and access to justice have become all about access to money, and Aaron tried to change that. That should never have been considered a criminal activity."

Mr. Swartz did not talk much about his impending trial, Quinn Norton, a close friend, said on Saturday, but when he did, it was clear that "it pushed him to exhaustion. It pushed him beyond."

Recent years had been hard for Mr. Swartz, Ms. Norton said, and she characterized him "in turns tough and delicate." He had "struggled with chronic, painful illness as well as depression," she said, without specifying the illness, but he was still hopeful "at least about the world."





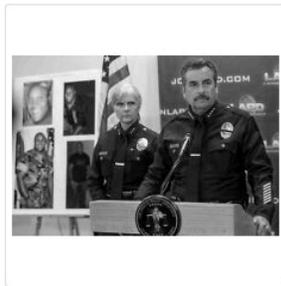
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In this Oct. 11, 2012, file photo, Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke talks during a budget hearing in Milwaukee. The Wisconsin sheriff said he released an ad calling on residents to defend themselves because the old model of having a citizen call 911 and wait for help isn't always the best option. / AP

Written by  
Amy Forliti  
Associated Press

FILED UNDER

Local News

A sheriff who released a radio ad urging Milwaukee-area residents to learn to handle firearms so they can defend themselves while waiting for police said Friday that law enforcement cutbacks have changed the way police can respond to crime.

In the 30-second commercial, Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke Jr. says personal safety is no longer a spectator sport.

"I need you in the game," he says.

"With officers laid off and furloughed, simply calling 911 and waiting is no longer your best option," he adds. "You can beg for mercy

## Checklist

*THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXHILARATING THAN TRUSTING A STRANGER WITH WHOM YOU HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON*, 2013

Wire glass, spray paint, reinforced concrete

3 slabs, left: 35 1/4 x 28 1/4 x 1 3/4 inches, middle: 53 x 28 1/4 x 1 3/4 inches, right: 37 1/4 x 28 1/4 x 1 3/4; overall dimensions variable

*IN SOME MOMENTS SHE SEEMED TO HERSELF A PERSON WITH NO PRIOR LIFE*, 2013

Reinforced concrete, graphite, steel chain

Each side 8 1/2 inches tall x 3 inches diameter; overall dimensions variable

*MOMMA ALWAYS TOLD ME GIRL COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS*, 2013

Yellow zinc plated steel chain

58x58 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Martos Gallery, New York.

## About the Artist

Davina Semo's one-person exhibitions include *WE BEGIN WITH THE NOISE*, Martos Gallery, New York; *BEFORE SHIFTING TO THE BLACKNESS*, Rawson Projects, Brooklyn; *Creature from the Blue Lagoon*, organized by Bob Nickas, Bridgehampton, New York; *2011 Bridgehampton Biennial*, organized by Bob Nickas, Bridgehampton, New York; and *PACING LIKE A TIGER*, Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam;. She has been included in group exhibitions with Brand New Gallery, Milan; Bureau, New York; Nicole Klagsbrun, New York; Ribordy Contemporary, Geneva; Marlborough Madrid, Madrid; Room East, New York; Eleven Rivington, New York; Shoot the Lobster, New York; Paradise Row, London; and Greene Naftali, New York, among others. Davina Semo earned her MFA from the University of California, San Diego. She lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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