

**LEGITIMATE
THEATER**
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
May 17—July 29, 2001



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Cameron Jamie
From *BB*, 2000

Contemporary Projects

LEGITIMATE THEATER

It may seem paradoxical to assert that something as artificial as theater is instinctive in human life, as characteristic of the species as language itself. However, some linguists and biologists theorize that language indeed is an instinct; others posit the same for music; and it is undeniable that the rituals and spectacles of acting appear to be primary activities in cultures throughout the world.

Theater, of course, is not only public and communal. Individuals engage in daydreaming, role playing, and private psychodrama all the time, imagining themselves in circumstances or as someone other than what or who they are in everyday existence. Every act of make-believe is, at some level, a sort of theater.

Each of the three artists in this exhibition explores the complexities of imagining the self as an idealized or wished-for person. In the work exhibited here, the subjects are icons of the selves they wish to be.

Los Angeles-based Cameron Jamie has always been fascinated by the theatrics and rituals of professional wrestling. As a youth in the mid-1970s, Jamie spent much of his time at Olympic Auditorium in downtown Los Angeles, attending wrestling matches and observing the denizens—performers, backstage professionals, and fans alike—of this ingrained American subculture, which became a significant inspiration in some of his art during the early 1990s. Jamie's wrestling-related projects from that period interweave aspects of daily life, popular culture, sociology, class, and psychology, all of which come together in his work.

The initial focal point of Jamie's art was his interest in transforming the self from the traits that formulate one's usual self-image. In an early series of untitled portraits Jamie commissioned a sketch artist to make a likeness of him that he subsequently subjected to a series of manipulations: He had the sketch rendered as an oil painting by a professional portraitist; he took the oil portrait to a pastel artist, who then made another rendition; he took that version to a griddle cook



Cameron Jamie
Self-Portrait,
1992

famous for making pictures out of pancake batter; and so on, giving each successive image to another artisan to be used as the basis of yet another representation. In a related project, begun in 1992, Jamie commissioned a professional costume designer in Mexico City to design and fabricate a mask of his face similar to the bizarre theatrical masks used by Mexican *lucha libre* (free-form) wrestlers. In 1996 Jamie wore the mask as part of a costume (also consisting of long johns with the back flap left open to reveal a latex backside that he bought at a novelty shop) in which he enacted the role of an amateur wrestler who stages matches at home (sometimes called “apartment wrestling”) in combat with other performers, notably a professional Michael Jackson impersonator. These performances were documented photographically and, in some cases, on video as well.

Jamie's next project, an eighteen-minute film titled *BB*, began in 1998 as crudely shot Super 8 footage (presented as a larger-than-life-scale video projection in this exhibition) of teenage boys in Southern California who imitate professional wrestling shows in makeshift arenas that they set up in their backyards. With the addition of a music soundtrack by the rock band the Melvins, whose dirgelike composition is characterized by a dense, almost Wagnerian splendor, what began as simple documentation evolved into a disturbing portrait of an American youth subculture. With a kind of naive obeisance the youngsters gleefully execute the flips, the dives, the somersaults that are the tropes of professional wrestling. Jamie records their cublike yet disturbingly violent play with fascination and a clear recognition of the aspirations and values of his young subjects engaging in ritualized battles and chosen rites of passage.



New York-based Chloe Piene delves into emotionally more ambiguous territory. In 1997 she responded to a personal ad in a newspaper for a pen pal, placed by a prisoner in a federal penitentiary in Lovelady, Texas. In the correspondence that followed, the prisoner explains that he is in a maximum-security facility, serving a life sentence for a double murder. He reveals that he loves heavy-metal music; he has eight tattoos, including a swastika, on his chest, back, and arms; he is a prodigious weight-lifter, capable of bench-pressing 390 pounds and proud of his 47-inch chest and 32-inch waist; and he describes himself as a skinhead and a white supremacist. As their correspondence becomes more familiar, he begins to wonder about his correspondent's body and relates his wish for a physical relationship to complement their epistolary one. He writes compellingly (with double underlines for emphasis), "I only want to be your friend, and make you happy, okay?" but adds, "I can't promise that I won't ever have sexual thoughts about you, because I'm a man—and I have been locked up a long time. Hell, I haven't smelled a woman in over 7 years. It would turn me into a barbarian. That is human nature. My human nature!!!" Some of the correspondence goes on to become more frankly sexual.

Perhaps the most affecting exchanges involve the prisoner's hopes. Though he does not deny his crime, he maintains the earnest belief that his conviction would be overturned on a technicality—"There were a lot of errors in my [court] judgment... Hopefully the courts will overturn my sentence," he writes—and he expresses the desire to return to a normal life doing ordinary things: "I'll probably go back to my welding when I get out. Or, I might try to find a job in a fitness place." It is a strangely powerful and unrequited wish, in which he imagines himself as what he would be if his entire life could

be turned around. For her part, Piene appears honest, forthright, and curious in her correspondence. Nothing about their seven-month exchange suggests that either party was using, or abusing, the other. Their erotic musings could be those of any two young people involved in a relationship—except, of course, that they are separated from each other in every way except in their imaginations.

With her correspondent's consent, Piene turned their letters into a book, a sort of real-life epistolary novel, *Lovelady, Texas*, which was published as a facsimile edition by the University of Northumbria Fine Art Press. Passages from the book are displayed in this exhibition. Piene has made two related pieces for video projection. In *You're Gonna Be My Woman*, a young woman clad only in panties crouches on the floor of what might be a prison cell, taunting the viewer with a voice electronically slowed to an animal-like snarl, over and over: "You're gonna be my woman." *Little David* features the image of a nine-year-old boy wearing only his white underpants and aggressively warning the viewer, in a voice distorted to a profound bass rumble, "I'm gonna squish 'em... I'm gonna squish 'em until there's nothing left... Come on cutie, let's go. I'll squish 'em good... They'll be so squished, they'll be like a pancake, run over by a car," and boasting similar protestations of his masculinity. The power plays and assertions of dominance by these two belligerent figures clearly belie their vulnerability and enact a psychodrama of oppression and subjugation.

Chloe Piene

Fist Squishy, from *Little David*, 1999



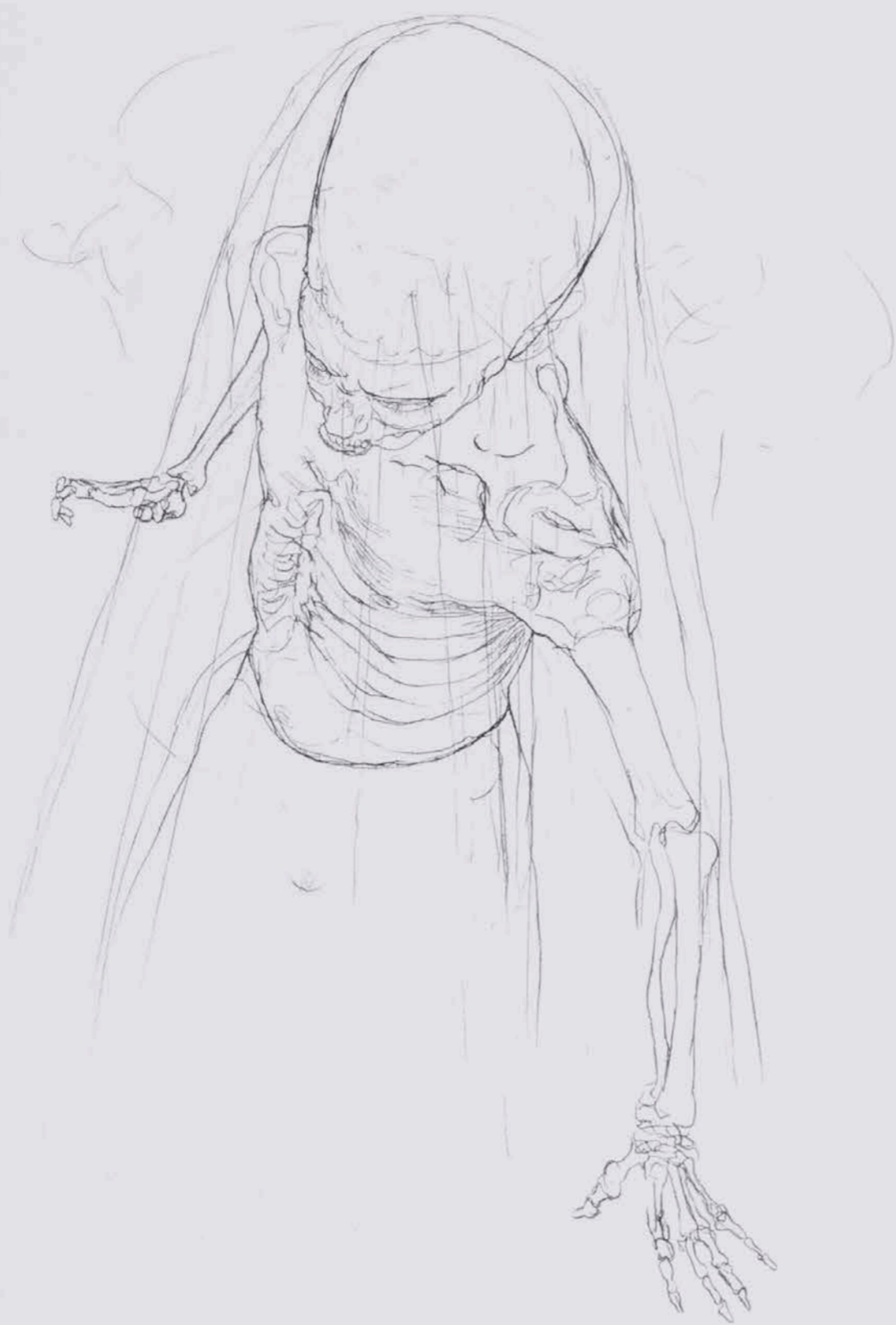
Katy Grannan
Ghent, NY (from *Dream America*)
[girl with cockatiel], 2000

Katy Grannan is a graduate of the photography program of Yale University's School of Art. Her recent photography is semidocumentary and semiautobiographical, representing what may be a subconscious effort to explore her own roots in a middle-class neighborhood of Arlington, Massachusetts. In 1999 Grannan began placing classified ads in small-town newspapers in upstate New York and the upper Midwest, soliciting subjects to pose for photographs in their own homes. After describing her project in telephone conversations with prospective sitters, she went directly to their homes, toting the essential gear for a photo shoot—a camera, two lights on stands, and a small electric fan, Grannan's version of the fashion photographer's wind machine. Two series of pictures emerged from this project, *Poughkeepsie Journal* and *Dream America*.

With a spartan economy of means, Grannan transforms her subjects' living rooms or bedrooms into would-be photo studios, moving unwanted furniture out of the way and arranging props from around the house for the camera's view. Within these unremarkable domestic settings and using household objects, Grannan assembles a visually dramatic stage of familiar-looking rooms, decorated variously with wood veneer wall paneling, floral wallpaper, shag carpeting,

parquet-patterned linoleum flooring, faux leopard-skin bedspreads, and exotic ceramic figurines and planters. Enter the amateur models, mostly women in their twenties or thirties, but occasionally teenage couples, a mother and child, a young man; once in a while they are joined by the family pets. The resulting pictures are collaborations between Grannan and her sitters—photographed at ground level and sporting only a few tattoos, or kneeling in profile as if posing for a girlie magazine, or poised in a strapless blue gown and carrying a trained cockatiel perched on an elegantly outstretched finger.

Some art critics have suspected Grannan of "slumming it" with people who appear less sophisticated than the denizens of the art world constituting her general audience. That suspicion, however, may reflect the critics' bias, in terms of sensibility and economic class, more than the artist's. For her part, Grannan evinces a poignant empathy with her subjects. There is nothing particularly voyeuristic about these collaborations, in which the sitters willingly, perhaps even wishfully, present themselves to an imagined audience through Grannan's photographs. If they are transformed into objects, then it is into objects of their own desiring.



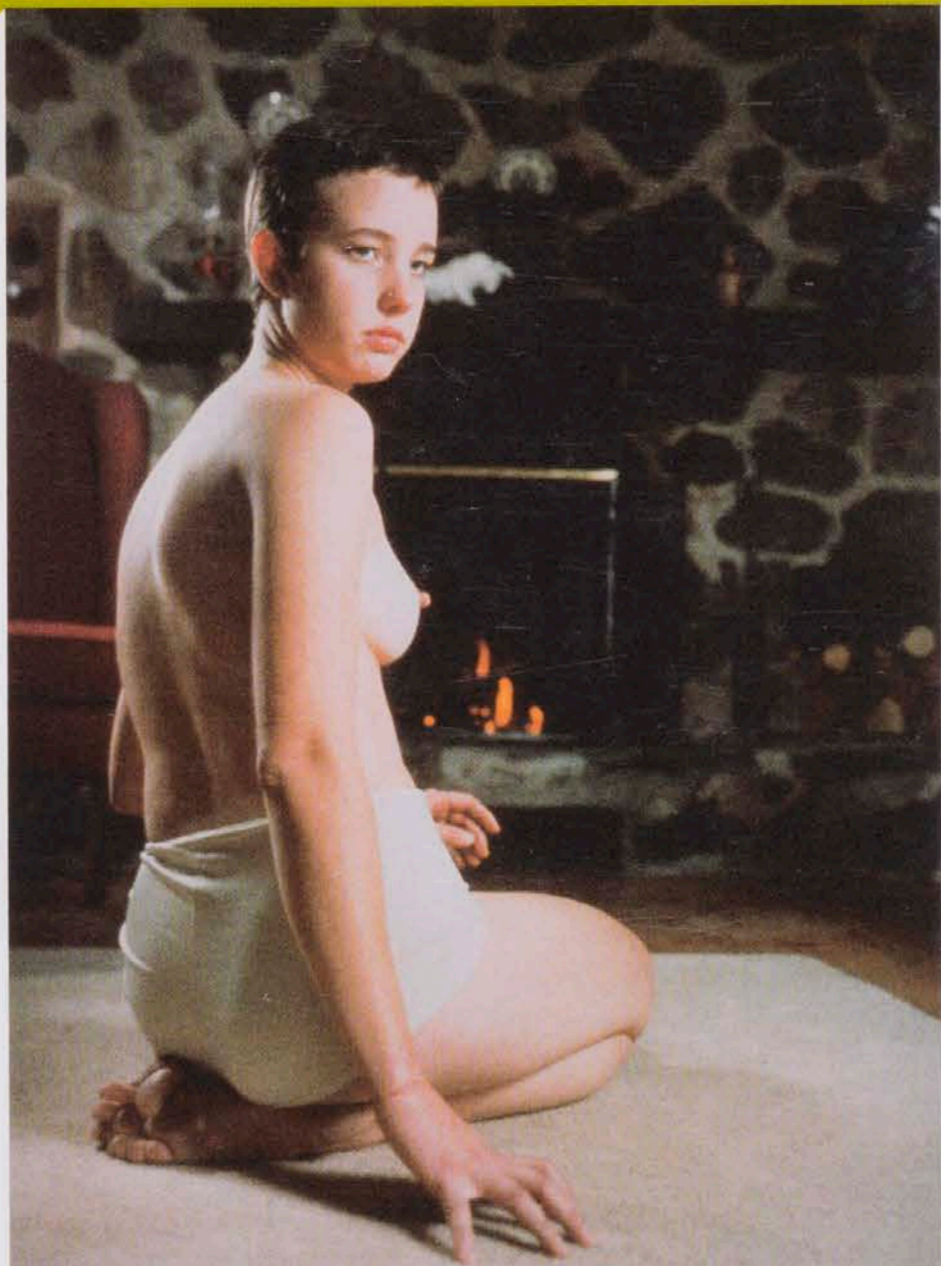
Chloe Piene
Untitled (Little David Two Step), 1999

Each of these artists adopts a quasi-documentary strategy, in which people are recorded expressing or acting out their inner desires and aspirations. The veracity of the result might appear suspect, for the very intervention of the artists may impeach the innate credibility of what they record. And yet the psychological tension and theatricality of their work is situated precisely in the obvious discrepancy between what is wished for and what simply is. Jamie's young wrestlers use the conventions of entertainment wrestling to imagine their full-grown manliness and bravado. Piene and her incarcerated pen pal use the ancient tradition of letter writing to imagine the transcendence of their personal histories and their separation in real time and space. Grannan and her sitters appropriate the familiar visual vocabulary of pinup photos and soft-core girlie magazines to evoke an aura of high-fashion glamour and erotic desire.

This quasi-documentary strategy is perhaps quite natural to a generation that has been weaned on the Internet and new media, where virtual reality, fantasy, instant data, opinion, misinformation, and hard documentation coexist in an almost seamless continuum. This is an environment in which the presentation of information is largely random, if not accidental, and an individual's perceptions of what is "out there" are highly selected, maybe all but invented at will and by whim. These three artists explore how people of any generation envision themselves as they might wish to be, how they might change their lives, what culturally defined roles they might play other than the ones they adopt every day. During their collaboration in the creation of these artworks they are performing in a kind of theater—not a public theater with an assembled audience, but a theater of the imagination, a theater of life. There can be no more legitimate theater than that.

Howard N. Fox
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

I would like to thank Thomas Frick for his perceptive editing of my text; Paul Wehby for his inventive design of this brochure; Beverly Sabo for her administrative support of the project; and Portland McCormick and Erika Lowe for making sure the artworks arrived in an uncommonly short lead time!



Katy Grannan
Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)
[kneeling girl with yellow underwear], 1998

checklist

Cameron Jamie

Born 1969, Los Angeles, California
 Lives in Los Angeles

Untitled (8 portraits), 1991-94

Pencil on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm); pastel on paper, 18 x 12 in. (45.7 x 30.5 cm); oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm); pancake, 7 x 6 in. (17.8 x 15.2 cm); enamel on satin, 37½ x 33½ in. (95.3 x 85.1 cm); paint on Styrofoam, 23 x 2½ x 20½ in. (58.4 x 6.4 x 52.1 cm); black-and-white photograph, 18 x 15½ in. (45.7 x 39.4 cm) mixed media on black-and-white photograph, 19½ x 16½ in. (49.5 x 41.9 cm)
 Overall dimensions variable
 The Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica

Self-Portrait, 1992

Spandex fabric, vinyl fabric, imitation fur, thread, and laces
 Fabricated by Dr. Sty, Mexico City
 12¾ x 11½ x 12 in. (32.4 x 29.2 x 30.5 cm)
 Lent by the artist

The New Life, 1996

Two C prints
 Each 20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm)
 The Collection of Barry Sloane, Los Angeles

BB, 2000

Super 8 film, black-and-white (transferred to video for exhibition), music soundtrack by the Melvins
 18 min., 20 sec.
 Courtesy of Catherine Bastide, Brussels

Chloe Piene

Born 1972, Stamford, Connecticut
 Lives in New York

Lovely, Texas, 1998

Hardbound facsimile edition of correspondence
 11½ x 8 x 1 in. (29.2 x 20.3 x 2.5 cm)
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

You're Gonna Be My Woman, 1998

Video projection
 4 min., 25 sec.
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Little David, 1999

Video projection
 3 min., 55 sec.
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Untitled (David Arch), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 33 x 24 in. (83.8 x 61 cm)
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Untitled (Little David Two Step), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 53 x 36 in. (134.6 x 91.4 cm)
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Untitled (David with Hard Lines), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 43 x 26¼ in. (109.2 x 66.7 cm)
 Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

Untitled (Pieta), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 52 x 42 in. (132.1 x 106.7 cm)
 Lent by Dillon Cohen, New York

Untitled (David from Below), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 51½ x 47¾ in. (130.8 x 121.3 cm)
 Lent by Dillon Cohen, New York

Untitled (Little Skeleton Babe), 1999

Charcoal on paper
 42 x 38 in. (106.7 x 96.5 cm)
 Lent by Dillon Cohen, New York

Katy Grannan

Born 1969, Arlington, Massachusetts
 Lives in New York

Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)

[kneeling girl with yellow underwear], 1998
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Courtesy of Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)

[kneeling girl with toy horse], 1998
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Lent by Norman Dubrow, New York

Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)

[standing nude with dog], 1998
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Lent by A. M. Homes, New York

Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)

[standing nude, "blue Venus"], 1998
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Private collection, New York, courtesy of Lawrence Rubin · Greenberg Van Doren · Fine Art, New York

Untitled (from Poughkeepsie Journal)

[kneeling girl with red and black figurine], 1998
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Courtesy of Lawrence Rubin · Greenberg Van Doren · Fine Art, New York

Poughkeepsie, NY (from Dream America)

[kneeling boy with white powder], 1999
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Courtesy of Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

Poughkeepsie, NY (from Dream America)

[girl on kitchen floor], 1999
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Lent by David D. Colburn, Northbrook, Illinois, courtesy of Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

Rhinebeck, NY (from Dream America)

[standing boy in blue pants], 2000
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Courtesy of Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

Ghent, NY (from Dream America)

[girl with cockatiel], 2000
 C print
 45 x 35½ in. (114.3 x 90.2 cm)
 Collection of Nicholas and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, New York, courtesy of Lawrence Rubin · Greenberg Van Doren · Fine Art, New York