



Three Goat Girls, 2007, photomontage, 102 x 127 cm. Courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, New York

MARNIE WEBER: VARIATIONS ON A WESTERN SONG

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As a cleaner swept away stray bits of straw from the floor of Fredericks & Freiser gallery, it made one wonder if the Spirit Girls had come for a visit the night before, and what sort of paranormal activities they had been up to. In Marnie Weber's solo exhibition *Variations on a Western Song*, the artist seamlessly blends photomontage, sculpture and film to create an

overall experience rich in loving detail. Spiritualism, a religious movement based on direct communication with the dead, was wildly popular in the mid-1800s in the US and UK. Women in particular were keen to advance its teachings, since it gave them a chance to be leaders instead of followers.

Using the continuing storyline of the Spirit Girls, a troupe of musicians risen from the dead to communicate their message of emancipation, the exhibition is centred around Weber's 24-minute 16mm film, also featured in solo shows at Patrick Painter in Los Angeles and London's Emily Tsingou. The work is lush and haunting. Projected in a darkened room with actual hay bales to sit on, *A Western Song* (all works 2007) follows the lead Spirit Girl, played by Weber, as she makes her way through a ramshackle Western town inhabited by odd characters in bizarre costumes, such as a banjo-playing pig-man. The elaborate sets and compelling soundtrack, featuring the melancholy twang of guitars at times reminiscent of a David Lynch score, adds to the surreal narrative and draws you in to a persuasive hyperreality. The film's climax is a series of satisfying low-tech special effects, as the Spirit Girls eventually rescue their lost member after her spirit has left her body following a series of hallucinatory acts.

In the gallery's front room, a series of photomontages of the Spirit Girls situated in a wide variety of unreal scenic landscapes, such as *Journey to the Haunted Windmill*, add another layer to the narrative. Weber created the nine unique collages by separately photographing the characters from the movie and integrating them with other photos of miniature sets, along with plastic animals and hand-painted backdrops. Her flawless composite technique complements her subject matter, more reminiscent of spirit photography than today's slick Photoshop creations.

Several well-crafted sculptures, some used in the film, add to the overall atmosphere of a turn-of-the-century circus. *Javelina*, a demonic-looking pig with an eyeball on its back, and *Circus Bear* are both cast from taxidermied animals. Lucky for us something was lost in translation, and her carnival creations transcend their source material, adding up to more than mere props. Weber's complete devotion to a strange, dreamlike world makes us want to follow her to the next chapter in this peculiar yet inviting fairy tale for adults. Unlike a mindless Hollywood blockbuster foisted upon the public, this would be one sequel to look forward to. *Chris Bors*