

# MODERN PAINTERS

July/August 2013

## NEW YORK

### Chantal Akerman

*The Kitchen // April 12–May 11*

FANS OF AKERMAN'S EARLY work depicting the ordinary lives of trapped women—*Saute ma ville*, 1968, or *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975—will find a lot to like in this solo exhibition, titled “Maniac Shadows.” It includes a video installation, a suite of 100 photographs hung like tiles on a wall, and a video of Akerman reading *My Mother Laughs*, an autobiographical text in which she intertwines the narration of the story of her mother, a Holocaust survivor sick with cancer, with that of her own. The exhibition captures the intensely lonely inner life of an artist who has spent the last few decades looking out at the world but never really stepping into it.

The three-channel video is projected on five screens—three on the wall that greets the viewer,

corner; the sound of her reading occasionally seeps into the front room. “Will I last for four weeks?” she asks about having to stay with her sick mother. “I only last if I hide from life. What life? I don’t have a life. I don’t know how to make one.” As if to remind the viewers that they are watching her life—or lack thereof—rather than cinema, Akerman occasionally makes an appearance in the projection, shadowed against a translucent white curtain or holding up her BlackBerry to film herself staring into a mirror. To highlight her isolation, she ends the loop of projections with scenes from a street party in New York City. The camera watches the neighbors as they eat and talk, but there is never any indication that Akerman joins in.

When she started making



and two repeated vignettes on opposing sides. Filmed using both Akerman’s BlackBerry and HD cameras, the channels frequently switch from scene to scene without any apparent narrative thread between them. Many of the shots capture views through windows in Akerman’s apartments in Paris and New York: dank, claustrophobic airshafts, an empty pool in a shared courtyard. Occasionally, the camera pans to show an interior—a living room that looks like it hasn’t been redecorated since the 1950s. A narrow hallway is piled with garbage that a cleaning woman is organizing into bags. Looking at these, one feels the sort of anxiety that comes from being trapped for purely internal reasons.

In a back gallery, Akerman’s husky voice intones her autobiography in another projection, bewilderingly hedged into a

films, Akerman’s insistence on transforming the quotidian into something epic was revolutionary. But in the age of social media, her work reads differently. The suite of 100 photographs on the back wall of the gallery are intimate glimpses into Akerman’s private life and the things she looks at when she’s out in the world (a girl on the subway, the shadow of her embracing someone on the beach). But to most eyes, they will look like nothing more than a well-curated Instagram feed. Perhaps we owe Akerman homage for empowering the prosaic. Or perhaps, with the isolation engendered by online media, we exist in a state similar to hers. Thanks to social media, most of us observe the world rather than step into it. Fifty years ago, making art out of the ordinary was revolutionary—today it’s merely commonplace. —Brienne Walsh