

ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 2007

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

MIRANDA JULY IS MOST WIDELY RECOGNIZED today as a filmmaker and fiction writer. Her first feature film, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, 2005, garnered prizes at both Sundance and Cannes; her first collection of fiction, *No One Belongs Here More Than You: Stories*, is due from Scribner in May. But she initially attracted attention in the mid-'90s for her work in performance art. While July's first efforts in this discipline appeared in a popular context (a longtime resident of the Pacific Northwest, she was regularly an opening act for bands like Sleater-Kinney), she has since performed in more explicitly artcentric venues, incorporating a fluid multimedia mix of film and video, music, and audience participation. Whether on stage, on paper, or on celluloid, she typically combines whimsy, sentimental confession, and black humor to tell stories of troubled relationships.

Following this template, July's latest performance piece, *Things We Don't*

Understand and Definitely Are Not Going to Talk About, 2006—which will be staged next month at The Kitchen in New York, and which July is also adapting for her next feature film—tells the story of a classic love triangle. Announcing that he's "not feeling it," a man named Donnie leaves his girlfriend, Fiona, to take up with another woman, Susan. There's nothing classic about the work's dramaturgy, however: July takes audience participation to exceptional lengths and deploys an off-stage studio, equipped with a live feed, as an extension of the set. A dead cat narrates; a drawing comes to life. But a stage direction in the script regarding the interview that July conducts onstage to find out the romantic history of two actor-volunteers—"Get lots of details"—is a reminder that, for all its fantastical elements, the work is grounded in the fine-grained naturalism of everyday intimacy and its discontents.

—ALEX MAR

Miranda July

TALKS ABOUT *THINGS WE DON'T UNDERSTAND AND DEFINITELY ARE NOT GOING TO TALK ABOUT*, 2006

WHEN I BEGAN WORKING on this performance, I had just written a number of short stories about infidelity, couples breaking up, abandonment—so I was already circling around the idea for the plot. One of my starting points was the Suzi Quatro song “Stumblin’ In,” which was and is a special song for my parents; I made it a special song for the fictional couple in the performance, Donnie and Fiona, too. I was, in other words, coming at the topic both from my point of view now and from that of a child watching her parents’ marriage. Over time, I realized that the performance also had to be about nothingness, boredom, paralysis—all the things that seem to be the opposite of the wholeness and fullness we seek in love and art. For example, Fiona has a conversation with individual seconds of the day, and Donnie remembers himself as a child cutting open a stuffed animal, looking for its magical core, only to find sand.

When the performance begins, I’m onstage, as Fiona, talking right to the audience, saying, “You have clearly struggled and been in pain . . . and I want you to know that you deserve to be loved. . . . I am going to bring you home”—all the things we all wish someone would say to us. Then I say, “We already know you’re not house-trained,” and you begin to realize I’m actually speaking to a cat. I exit, and a pair of giant cat’s paws appears on the big screen that’s the backdrop to the stage, and the cat (actually me in voice-over) tells his sad story and how he now hopes to be adopted by Donnie and Fiona. But because they break up, they never go through with the adoption, and the cat is euthanized. So the cat is a casualty of the breakup, but he keeps playing an important role even after he dies.

Then I come back onstage, as myself, and I ask if there are any long-term couples in the audience. I pick one couple to play Donnie and Fiona, and a blond woman to play Susan. The couple come onstage and I ask them all these questions—how they met, when they realized they were in love. These details are woven into the script, which means it’s never the same twice.

The rest of the audience participates as well. I teach everyone how to make the sound of a drum roll by stamping their feet, and they practice reading lines in unison off the screen—just the men, just the women, and then everyone together. These are also things that come into play later on.

There’s a bed backstage with a video camera over it that has a live feed to the screen on the stage. The couple from the audience are taken to the bed, and an assistant, who you can’t hear, tells them to position themselves in certain ways, while I narrate, saying, “Donnie and Fiona will go home tonight and sleep as they always sleep, first together, like spoons, then apart.” People sometimes think what’s on the screen is prerecorded, because the couple’s movements are synchronized with what I’m saying, but it’s live.

When I perform this show, I think the audience and I are both aware of how it is a rare and exciting thing that we are all in the same room together for this one night. Great risks are taken on both sides. After making a film, it’s hard not to appreciate how doing things live means that you can think of something and just do it, the very same evening, in front of real people. It’s not so cataclysmic to fail; you can change the piece again for the next show. So you’re braver. On the other hand, in a performance you

could literally be killed by or kill an audience member. There is always that possibility.

I initially wanted to make a performance that would have a second life as a “performance film” à la Spalding Gray and *Swimming to Cambodia*. But ultimately I could not keep myself from writing scenes that required actors, locations, etc., so I ended up with both a performance and a fairly traditional screenplay. And I have a book of stories coming out in the spring, so it is now obvious that I also see myself as a writer.

Perhaps part of why I have these three separate things going on is that I always want to have something to look forward to, and something to feel guilty about. All the media certainly help each other creatively. But as far as the anxiety of moving between the different worlds with all their accompanying agents and critics and audiences goes, I always feel like I’m cheating on at least one of them, and I guess I like that feeling. It keeps me from identifying myself with one particular institution or legacy.

With any project, I’m simply trying to capture a feeling that I once had—like, in this piece, the queasy, illicit feeling of hearing “Stumblin’ In” as a child. Usually, that requires some kind of metaphor. When you’re writing fiction you can be very precise about the metaphor, and in a movie you can do it without words, just with looks. And if you are there, live before an audience, you can show weakness and bravery in a way that isn’t possible in the other two forms. But for all three it always comes down to magic, which is its own master and apparently couldn’t care less about these distinctions. □

