

*the* PARIS REVIEW

# Transgression and the Prohibition: An Interview with Moyra Davey

By Sarah Cowan January 12, 2018



STILL FROM *LES GODDESSES*, 2011. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

*“A work, once finished, is ‘like a tombstone,’ ” Moyra Davey writes in her latest book, Les Goddesses/Hemlock Forest. Always aware of the inevitable end, she has constructed a practice conscious of its own past and reliant on radical self-doubt. Her photographs, films, and essays cross-reference and depend on one another as she makes a subject of her own process and its intentions, fears, and failures.*

*Davey has published twelve artfully designed books that lovers of her work covet for their rarity. This most recent book gathers two essays, “Les Goddesses” (2011) and “Hemlock Forest” (2016), along with photographs and stills from their respective film iterations, in which she recites her text aloud for the camera, opening it up to the serendipity of mistakes.*

*Davey emerged in the eighties, in an art world allergic to the confessional work she was making. Over time, she experienced a “gradual seeping in of a kind of biographical reticence,” until, as she writes, “my subjects constituted little more than the dust on my bookshelves or the view under the bed.” In the *Les Goddesses* film, she appears not photographing dust but wiping it from her own portfolios in order to reconsider the brassy, sexy photographs she made of her punk teenage sisters in the eighties. She pins the prints to the walls of her apartment where they function as visual footnotes in a monologue dealing with family and disappointment.*

*Davey often portrays herself in her New York City apartment, within reach of any bookmarked volume in the crosshatched piles on her shelves. Her writing is weighted by reverence for other artists, writers, and filmmakers, whose quotes crowd her paragraphs. “Perhaps I still ‘write’ like a photographer,” she once wrote. “I go out into the world of other people’s writing and take snapshots.” Davey tends to invite her audience in at what feels like the most inopportune moment, when she is surrounded by notes, her rooms in a state of honest disarray, a mess of chairs and dishes piled in the sink. That’s why, as I sat down in her living room for our interview, I felt an uncanny familiarity—everything: the bookcases, the couch, the kitchen, was as I had seen it before—down to her cannonball-like pitbull, Rose, who lay on her back, watching us talk upside down.*

## INTERVIEWER

How did these two pieces come together into this book? They were made years apart—*Les Goddesses* in 2011 and *Hemlock Forest* in 2016.

## DAVEY

After I made *Les Goddesses*, I spoke about it as a kind of love letter to my family. I tell the story of my sisters and myself when we were debauched teenagers. I draw parallels between my mother and my siblings, and Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughters and their “bad behavior” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They got pregnant before marriage, they ran off to France, they lived as free spirits. Bringing the two stories together began with these fabricated coincidences of dates, for instance. My parents getting married exactly two hundred years after Wollstonecraft’s parents, having the same number of children, and coincidences of given names like Claire and Jane. By linking my family stories to the Romantics, I grant them a different kind of valence. Then, two or three years after making *Les Goddesses*, there was a tragedy. My sister Jane’s youngest daughter, Hannah, overdosed, and I started to rethink the way I had portrayed my siblings and all the drugs and drinking. I began to wonder what would it mean to revisit the story of *Les Goddesses*, in light of this fatal overdose, and not to show us as cute, fearless punks from the early eighties, but as we are now, visibly scarred women in our fifties and early sixties? What does our reckless behavior mean now, in light of what happened to Hannah?



STILL FROM *HEMLOCK FOREST*, 2016. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

## INTERVIEWER

So how did Chantal Akerman end up getting woven into such a personal story?

## DAVEY

I was thinking about nature and the social, two prominent themes from Wollstonecraft's writing. *Hemlock* was commissioned by Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, a country Wollstonecraft traveled to and wrote letters from in 1796. I chose an image of the forest to represent nature and for the social it was the subway. I was thinking of the New York City subway, a space I love, where I read, write, and shoot film. I started to remember this incredible shot from Akerman's film *News from Home*, made in 1977 with Babette Mangolte, who's a great cinematographer. The subway's shaking in every direction and the camera remains absolutely still, and I had this idea that I would

attempt to restage the shot. I did it with a camerawoman, Liz Sales, and then I found out the next day that Akerman had committed suicide on the day of the shoot. That coincidence redirected the whole project and made me delve back into reading Akerman, listening to her, watching her films again. It became a film much more about Akerman than I'd ever intended. She was someone who had been a big influence on me when I was younger.

#### INTERVIEWER

Was the urge to create an homage?

#### DAVEY

It was partly an homage, and it scared the wits out of me to do that shot. I always expect the worst—that a cop is going to board the train and throw me off, or that I'll be confronted by a passenger. Ever since I was a kid I've had this exaggerated fear of authority. I realized in my work that I have to push myself to do the things that unnerve me. I talk about this idea of "low-hanging fruit" in *Hemlock Forest*. It's so easy now, with video, to turn the camera on and do anything and make anything, and I think you have to up the ante. For me, it's pushing myself out of my comfort zone and being on the street or being on the subway with a camera makes me really nervous. Hence this huge feeling of relief, triumph, even, when you go out into the world and manage to produce something meaningful.



STILL FROM *LES GODDESSES*, 2011. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

## INTERVIEWER

I felt that both essays ended with that kind of push. You capture something you didn't expect. In *Les Goddesses*, it's the sunrise reflecting on the building across from your apartment, and in *Hemlock Forest* you decide to spontaneously turn on the camera and film your son and his friends.

## DAVEY

For a very long time, I've been interested in transgression and the prohibitions against what you can and cannot do as an artist, specifically in film and photography. It's all very connected to my art education in the eighties and early nineties, ideas around photography and representation. Pictures Generation artists were refusing to photograph actual women. They rephotographed photos of women, or

dolls, or turned themselves into archetypes, like Cindy Sherman. My approach was “retrograde.” I was photographing my sisters live and naked. I’m really stubborn and I don’t like to follow rules, but in fact, I did stop photographing my sisters and found other avenues to pursue. Recording my son’s friends falls into this category of the forbidden, something I would not have done in previous decades. It happened spontaneously, and, like Akerman’s sudden death, suggested a way to rewrite the narrative, to ask a different set of questions about representation.

#### INTERVIEWER

In your writing, you quote others almost in the same way that the Pictures Generation artists appropriated imagery. Do you see it that way?

#### DAVEY

I think that’s a good take on it, but unlike someone like Kathy Acker, for instance, I have an exaggerated fear of plagiarism, so I’m really careful to always attribute. Now I reread some of my older writing and I think I’m quoting way too much. I’m trying to get away from lifting other people’s words so much. In *Hemlock Forest*, I cite the women, name them, but I abbreviate or relegate the men’s names to endnotes, a subtle feminist gesture.

#### INTERVIEWER

In *Notes on Photography and Accident* you wrote about how you can undermine the consumption of images by revisiting old work. Were

you thinking about that when you revisited the photographs of your sisters from the eighties?

DAVEY

I try with my work not to leave a heavy footprint. I fold and mail my photographs for exhibition rather than frame, crate, and ship them. Repurposing an existing image from decades past abets this strategy. I live with a collector, someone who has zero fear of acquiring objects, even huge ones, like stadium speakers. I'm the opposite. It spooks me to acquire things that don't have an immediate use value.

INTERVIEWER

That's so interesting! You so often photograph and film the apartment and all of your possessions and books collecting dust. I always read it as a portrait of your lifestyle and imagined all the objects were yours.





STILL FROM *LES GODDESSES*, 2011. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

## DAVEY

Only books. I don't feel weighed down by books, they're the one thing I don't have any qualms about buying, because I need and use them all the time. In the late nineties, I edited a book called *Mother Reader* just after my son was born. That book cemented my relationship to literature and was very instrumental in my trajectory. But with speakers and tube amps, among the many things the artist Jason Simon, my husband, collects, all I can think about is this is stuff that will outlive you.

## INTERVIEWER

In *Hemlock Forest* your son is about to go to college, and you have an urge to capture something of him before he goes. But you're wary of what you call the "cliché of the empty nest," even if the feelings about

it are “strong and real.” What distinguishes the cliché and the real feeling?

DAVEY

To be sad that your son is going off to college is a cliché. Nonetheless, this separation had an urgency for me and I wanted to talk about it, even if it did feel very awkward. What I didn’t know, being from Canada and having gone to a CUNY-style school in Montreal, where I grew up, was that my son would be back every two months.

INTERVIEWER

There are moments in *Hemlock Forest* where you switch to an epistolary mode, addressing Chantal and, at the end, your son. You also switch to describe yourself as “the woman making this film.” What made you adjust the point of view and addressee?

DAVEY

If there are things you can’t write in the first person you move them into the second or third and they become possible. You have to play with proximity and distance in the writing, in the portrayals, in the address, in the way you shoot something. There’s always a line you shouldn’t cross, but my mode is pretty confessional, and I think I have a bit of a perverse thing about crossing the line at least once in every film. I’m creating a bit of abjectness in the piece, but it’s essential to always have some element of personal risk, otherwise it’s not worth doing.

INTERVIEWER

When you're writing, are you aware of the moments that cross that line?

DAVEY

I've noticed that when I start performing the material for the camera, I can tell instantly. Did you come to the screening at Lincoln Center?

INTERVIEWER

I couldn't make it, unfortunately.



STILL FROM *HEMLOCK FOREST*, 2016. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

DAVEY

Well this kind of incredible thing happened. I'd been editing *Hemlock Forest*, the book and the film, at the same time. And I didn't realize

until minutes before the premiere that two or three really important sentences were unintentionally cut from the video. Because I was doing this double edit—book and film—I was mentally supplying the missing lines as I watched the video. I’ll tell you what they were [flipping through book]—“The morning after the subway shot I learn of Akerman’s death. A friend tells me she was mourning the loss of her mother, who was also the subject of her last film. Apparently her mother’s death was supposed to free Chantal but it had the opposite effect.” Those are the lines that are missing from the film, and they’re pivotal!

INTERVIEWER

So you don’t even state that she died in the film?

DAVEY

I don’t state that she died!

INTERVIEWER

And have you reedited the film now?

DAVEY

I didn’t do it because I thought it was a Freudian mistake to have left out those lines, that perhaps I had unconscious guilt about claiming a special relationship to Akerman via this coincidence of her suicide on the day that I restaged her subway shot. I’m more comfortable with the passage existing as something that you read anyhow, rather than something that you hear in the film.

INTERVIEWER

Does writing have less that's off limits?

DAVEY

Absolutely. There's a lot more clarity of message when you write something. Writing holds ideas and feelings in a way that is much more stable, whereas a photograph is ambiguous and has the ability to distort much more than a text.

INTERVIEWER

Are there things you would never expose about yourself?

DAVEY

Oh yeah plenty! (*Laughs.*) I try for the maximum amount of honesty and disclosure, but there are many, many chapters that I can't imagine writing. I have diaries going back to the eighties that I'm trying to decide what to do with, like, should I destroy them? I never reread them. I will look back as long as it's taking me in a forward progression, in order to make something new. But for the sake of deciding what's going to outlive me, that just seems like such a waste of time.

*Sarah Cowan is a freelance writer and a video editor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She lives in Brooklyn.*