



MATT MORRIS
WITH JAMES LEE BYARS

THE PERFECT KISS (QQ)*

*questioning, queer



Bouquets of roses, love notes, commemorative snapshots, and boudoir décor are typically associated with romantic courtship; how might these gestures be read when used to remark on relationships that connect the art world? In this installation of works, Matt Morris interprets these forms literally and abstractly in order to consider how attachments are made between art histories and contemporary praxis, between exhibitions and the museums who host them, and amongst a global network of collectors, curators, couturiers, and other cultural producers complicit in the scripting of stories that characterize how artists are understood behind their work. Examinations of recent artistic pasts compel the shape of Morris' research-driven practice, conjoining conventional modes of object-making (like drawing and photography) with shifting roles of artist-as-curator and scholar.

The dominant canon has long favored works by American artist James Lee Byars (1932–1997) that are heroic, monolithic, and resplendent with bravado. Morris instead depicts an alternative and more softly intimate portrayal. Across several decades, Byars was committed to posing more questions than resolved answers and to destabilizing ideas of perfection—problems that are placed here into conversation with Morris' own inquiries into queer identity. Subverting easy categorization, Byars' oeuvre includes post-minimalist formal investigations, performance, and a daily ritual of correspondence that merged drawing and flirtatious letter writing. He wrote profusely to curators, collectors, and art world luminaries such as the German artist Joseph Beuys. In many cases these valentine-like texts went unanswered. Morris' selection of Byars works looks closely at



Top: Matt Morris, *The Good Enough Kiss* (detail), 2014. Iridescent watercolor on Gaylord archival tissue paper.

Bottom: James Lee Byars, Venice, c. 1980. Photo courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, gift of Morgan Thomas.

This spread: Matt Morris, *archive VI*, 2015. All of the vases from Morris' personal collection.



the ephemerality, rejection, and absence that permeates the cultural field in which both artists are positioned—tracing where personal histories and social contexts meet.

The show's title not only references *The Perfect Kiss*, a Byars performance in Brussels in 1974 that featured a same-sex, all-female make out session, but also echoes *The Perfect Moment*, the notoriously controversial exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs shown at the CAC twenty-five years ago this year. Morris' exhibition is infused with tenderness, disclosure, fetishization, and romance not unlike what is found in Mapplethorpe's images. While the 'Q' in the commonly used acronym for genders and sexualities, 'LGBTQIA,' is currently understood to refer to 'queer,' several decades ago it indicated 'questioning' as well. More than a stable sexuality or social status, Morris' use of 'queer' as a verb unsettles norms, singular beliefs, and narrow readings.

Throughout his career, Byars frequently collaborated with other artists, fashion houses such as Balenciaga, and dancers experimenting at the forefront of their field. The choreographer and dancer Yvonne Rainer wrote in response to her experience performing for Byars at Green Gallery in New York in 1963:

"I WILL NOT MAKE AN ISSUE OF IT. I can choose not to carry thru an impulse. On what basis is such a choice made? Sometimes I know... I share a common impulse with many people in the room: We want to defile, to desecrate, to shit on this whiteness, to crush this fragility, to smash this silence, to silence this shrieking purity. Enough poetry. Anyway, the thing is that I DON'T HAVE TO DO IT. Any of

it: all that smash and smudge, I choose not to do it. I choose to play the game his way and in so choosing I am free from wanting to destroy his image. I become powerful and happy. I become knowledgeable: I know what is appropriate to do. I find his image beautiful."

—Yvonne Rainer. *SOME THOUGHTS ON IMPROVISATION*

(for the painter James Lee Byars), 1963–64

Rainer's words characterize the clash of egos and aesthetic sensibilities that figure in the sort of artistic dialogue she was involved in with Byars in 1963. Morris attaches himself to Byars similarly. In choosing "to play the game his way," Morris echoes and appropriates Byars' formal interests, locating places of overlap in their shared blushing palettes, fragile tissue surfaces, and sensuous fabrics. The conjunction of the two artists' objects not only crafts a genealogy of artistic production that questions and queers its cultural context, but also calls attention to how such histories are constructed: the provenance of *The Rose Table of Perfect* (that is, a complete list of owners and exhibitions in which it has appeared) is on display alongside diaristic wall texts such as those that list the origins and histories of all of the flower vases Morris owns.

Like the globetrotting dandy Byars was before him, Morris produces work out of such promiscuous influences as psychoanalytic theory, queer femme aesthetics, white magic, and interior decorating. Both artists piece together cultural fragments amassed into sweet paradoxes: seductive and obtuse, or as critic Roberta Smith wrote about Byars at the time of his death, "austere and rococo, understated and flamboyant."

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

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Matt Morris is an artist, writer, and sometimes curator based in Chicago. He has presented artwork in Chicago, IL; Philadelphia, PA; Memphis, TN; Reims, France; Greencastle, IN; Lincoln, NE; Cincinnati, OH; and Baton Rouge, LA. Morris is a transplant from southern Louisiana who holds a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati, and earned an MFA in Art Theory + Practice from Northwestern University, as well as a Certificate in Gender + Sexuality Studies. He is a lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and teaches in the Sculpture as well as the Painting and Drawing departments. He is the Art Editor for *Newcity*; contributes to *Artforum.com*, *Art Papers*, *Flash Art*, and *Sculpture*; and his writing has appeared in numerous exhibition catalogues and artist monographs.

James Lee Byars was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1932. His career of producing drawings, sculptures, performances, and other conceptual artworks spanned more than four decades before his death in Cairo, Egypt in 1997. He studied art and philosophy at Wayne State University, graduating in 1955. His first solo exhibition was at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1958. Much of his adult life was spent in Europe and Japan. His extensive exhibition record includes numerous projects with Michael Werner Gallery, New York; the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto; Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Valencia, Spain; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany; multiple inclusions in the Venice Biennale; and participation in Documenta V and VI, Kassel, Germany. In 2014, his practice was reexamined in the retrospective *½ An Autobiography* at MoMA PS1 and in the conceptual project *I Cancel All My Works At Death* organized by Triple Candie for the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

Cover: Matt Morris, *Festoon Drape (for James, Robert, Zaha, Steven, and Eric)*, 2015. Ruched grey voile curtains. Installed for public viewing at the entrance of the Lower 2 Gallery

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