

56 HENRY

CYNTHIA TALMADGGE

FRANKLIN FIFTH HELENA

November 17 through January 16, 2021

Franklin Fifth Helena, Cynthia Talmadge's new solo exhibition – an immersive architectural installation of sand paintings – describes a small room, decorated in a mirrored trellis scheme but now disused and given over to storage, ostensibly situated in 12305 Fifth Helena Drive, Brentwood, Los Angeles. In addition to fragments, minutiae, and mementos from two people's social lives, travels, work, and studies, the room contains abandoned party decorations, seasonal ornaments, fallout shelter paraphernalia, leftovers from progressive political campaigns, pool cleaning equipment, and textbooks on psychology in quantities that reveal an author's pride or a reader's obsession (or both). Some of these elements form part of a dismantled reconstruction of another domestic space at nearby 902 Franklin Street in Santa Monica, though the impossibility of differentiating exactly which items originate where is very much at the heart of Talmadge's exhibition.

Franklin Fifth Helena borrows the format of the Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, a fifteenth century room relocated to the Met in the 1930s. Studiolos were intended for contemplation, study, and the display of objects indicating the owner's worldliness and erudition. Given the propensities of European nobility of the time, this meant the spaces could also be – appropriately to Talmadge's project – sites of meditation on morbid fascinations, and repositories for artifacts of (or acquired through) violence. In the Met's example, inlaid marquetry is used to depict a trompe l'oeil studiolo onto the walls of an actual one. Talmadge similarly maps the illusion of an imaginary space onto a physical one, but her depicted architecture reflects a midcentury L.A. sensibility and is rendered entirely in sand – a children's hobbyist technique she has scaled up and dramatically complicated in numerous paintings over the past seven years.

In 1962, the respective residents of 12305 Fifth Helena and 902 Franklin were analysed Marilyn Monroe and her doctor, Ralph Greenson, psychoanalyst to the stars, minor celebrity in his own right (he was played by Gregory Peck in the film adaptation of a novel based on his life), and a respected member of the

psychiatric community who published extensively and taught at UCLA. Notable for Talmadge's purposes are his work on trauma, borderline personality disorders, projection and transference, and the fact that his ideas influenced the development of modern marketing techniques. (He rates a fleeting mention in Adam Curtis's *Century of the Self* in this capacity.) Like Norma Jeane Mortenson's "Marilyn Monroe," Romeo Samuel Greenschpoon's "Ralph Greenson" was also an identity constructed to fulfill various needs.

Greenson, whose studies with Wilhelm Stekel place him in Freud's direct lineage, and who counted Freud's daughter Anna among his intimates, saw the trauma inflicted by childhood family dysfunction as the origin of all neuroses. He used a technique called "adoption therapy," which was intended to replace damaging childhood associations with new experiences of integration into a "healthy" family. Horrifyingly, in Monroe's case, the model family Greenson chose for the "adoption" was none other than his own. The treatment involved fourteen sessions a week (some with dinner and drinks) and required Monroe to develop relationships with Greenson family members and intermittently live with the Greensons. She also purportedly had to restage elements of the Greenson house within her own – the immediate subject of Talmadge's *Franklin Fifth Helena*. The disregard for personal or professional boundaries or for even the most rudimentary conventions of medical ethics (including those set out in Greenson's own writings) extended to the doctor exercising influence over every area of his patient's life, including where she lived, her choices of film roles, and her romantic partners. Monroe died while under Greenson's treatment, and inevitably, there has been speculation that Greenson was obsessed with Monroe, that the relationship was a sexual one, and that he was involved in a conspiracy to cover up the real cause of her death. Whatever the truth of those particular allegations, the confirmed abuses sufficiently epitomize the patriarchal dysfunction endemic to Freudianism and the cultures of self-actualization it has spawned.

Talmadge refuses the familiar depictions of Monroe – in reality, an intellectual at least on par with the Greensons of the word – as a person without agency, acted upon by men. Monroe has been described as a site of projection famously, endlessly, and Talmadge's project gives Greenson a turn on the same ride. While much of the contents of the work are drawn from historical information, the artist insists this is not a research project – leaving that to the documentarians,

biographers, and conspiracy theorists – and instead describes her work as a kind of method-acted historical fiction. The artist also implicates herself, describing her relationship to the subjects of *Franklin Fifth Helena* as “less like a historian or even a conspiracy blogger than a pervy psychoanalyst who has a too-special relationship with his favorite patients.”

Which objects on view belong to Monroe’s replication of 902 Franklin, and which come directly from her own life at 12305 Fifth Helena? Might Greenson have staged things on Franklin Street with the knowledge that, per his therapeutic program, Monroe would be recreating them on Fifth Helena? Is Monroe’s arrangement faithful to its Franklin Street source? Did she (consciously or unconsciously) aestheticize or editorialize in her selections? Is the apparently-dismantled state of the recreation in fact just another layer of staging and artifice? Which objects did Talmadge draw from the historical record and which are her own inferences or inventions? Might the official history include objects forged to satisfy the Monroe memorabilia market, or even planted after her death to fulfill some more sinister revisionist agenda? How deep in the D.N.A. of our culture, our politics, our nuclear families, does cold war moral and existential panic run? What is a red herring, a false flag, the product of paranoia, self-defense, or an unreliable narrator amusing herself? Has Talmadge left breadcrumbs, or is she lost with us in this funhouse of fragmenting, entwined identities? What does a psychospiritual space of pure projection, transference, and countertransference look like? What’s its address?

In *Franklin Fifth Helena*, any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is, if not entirely coincidental, a product of our collective pathologies.

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Cynthia Talmadge is a New York-based artist whose work in painting, installation, drawing, and photography has been shown, collected, and reviewed internationally. Talmadge’s projects exhibit her fascination with heightened emotional states, mediated portrayals of those states, and particularly the places where both converge. This solo exhibition, her third with 56 Henry, continues her investigations into what happens when private personal trauma, nostalgia, loss, and grief come into contact with the institutions of celebrity, money, and malfeasance. Talmadge is represented by 56 Henry.