Lutz Bacher
Burning the Days

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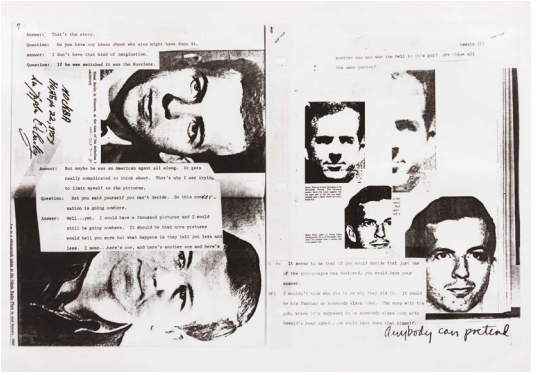
This exhibition offers an overview of Lutz Bacher's five decades of art production. Bacher (1943–2019) began making art in California in the 1970s under this pseudonym. Her earliest artworks were made with a (photo)camera. She took her own pictures, as well as transformed found photographs, drawing resonance out of them by distorting them, editing and combining them, or uncovering half-hidden details. Her approach often depended on chance or discovering the accidental, an openness that later grew to include sculpture, video and eventually museum-sized installations. She believed that artists can confront art and life through what is already made, permitting it to show her many sudden intrusions of beauty, comedy or violence. This approach to art embraced the art-historical tradition of the readymade, while also muddying its conventions, using a wide range of found materials in wild relation.

As an artist, Bacher spent her life grappling with the political and psychic tensions of the past century in America. A number of the subjects in *Burning the Days* are troubled 'Americana' symbols: a president and his widow, celebrities, soldiers, bison, could-be assassins and sites of historical ruin. Her art was animated from this violent outside, but much also emerged from questions inside, twinkling with a more intimate, affective and existential register: Who might Lutz Bacher be? What might she do as an artist? What might her art mean right now, or later?

The exhibition title, *Burning the Days*, is Bacher's own. It is the title she gave to an unfinished book that now exists as a binder in her archive. The book is a chronological compilation of the artist's work from 2013 until nearly the day she died in 2019. The title cites the expression used by soldiers during the Vietnam War to describe time spent off duty but still deployed. The exhibition too could be thought of as a draft, as, much like the book itself, it remains unfinished or unfinishable.

The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview

In 1976, Bacher was approached to be interviewed for a volume of artist interviews. Instead of speaking with someone about her art, she interviewed herself about Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of US President John F. Kennedy. The resulting work, *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview* (1976–78), is an 18-page photocollage, initially made as a paste-up mixing snippets of questions and answers written by Bacher with photocopies of Oswald's face. From these collages, Bacher made photostatic prints – a photographic technique favoured in legal contexts at the time for its direct imitation of original documents, because the reproductions were legally admissible in court.



The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview (Positive), 1976-78
Private Collection

The choice of Oswald as the work's ostensible subject, however, sets photostatic truth against one of the great examples of uncertainty in images. In Oswald, Bacher would find something like a cypher for her own displaced subject-hood, as well as an example of how unknowability can provoke desire, intrigue and speculation. What can an image tell you about a person, if anything? How are myths made?

In the following decades, Bacher would reiterate the work in different formats, including the live performance *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview (Performance, San Francisco, 18 July 1984)*, where she re-created the interview. In 1998, she recorded her computer screen as she zoomed and scrolled through hi-res scans of the interview, resulting in the digital screen-capture video *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview (Desktop version)*.

Jackie & Me

Jackie & Me (1989) claims to show Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the widow of US President John F. Kennedy, fleeing a photographer in New York's Central Park. Each of the pictures and their captions were taken from a book published by the paparazzi photographer Ron Galella. By using Galella's pages, Bacher offers another ambivalent photo story, one of American myth and fairy tale, but also a story of a woman fleeing capture, running away from a camera across a field and toward the woods – a fantasy of escape.



Jackie & Me (detail), 1989
Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway

In Memory of My Feelings

In Memory of My Feelings (1990) is a tall, narrow cabinet and a group of metal drawers containing folded T-shirts. Each is printed with a phrase borrowed from a personality test Bacher was asked to take by her surgeon before a medical procedure to remove tumours from her uterus.

Playboys
Jokes

Playboys (1991–93) is a group of airbrushed paintings that replicate Alberto Vargas's illustrations, a feature of *Playboy* magazine between 1957 and 1978. Bacher's paintings retain Vargas's original image-text pairings, printing captions that read as the imagined voices of the pin-up girls who sexualise any given topic, be it current affairs, feminism or American foreign policy. What happens to images made for male consumption when a woman takes over? Do they remain the same form of erotica? Affectionate homages? Statements of ambivalence, and if so, about whom or what?



Jokes (Jane Fonda), 1985–1988
Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody

To make *Jokes* (1985–88), Bacher appropriated a humour book of celebrities and politicians portrayed with uncanny captions. She rephotographed the book, enlarging the images, then crumpling, soiling or abandoning them outside. The subjects of the jokes range from American movie stars like Marilyn Monroe and Jane Fonda to politicians like Bella Abzug and John F. Kennedy, along with Billy Graham, an evangelical conservative preacher known for his widely televised sermons.



Jokes Kennedy/Goldwater (This Fucking Job), 1987
Private Collection

Both *Jokes* and *Playboys* show too much. To people of the time, the speakers were household names, and the jokes they tell are puzzling – sort of funny, but not really. The humour is the kind told in bathroom stalls, cheap magazines or unfortunate social encounters. Bacher used these questionable genres of humour to wonder about something less topical asking: What is a joke? Why do we tell them? What do they mean?

BINGO (or the year I was born)

For *BINGO (or the year I was born)* (2008), Bacher programmed a bingo sign to light up randomly and in perpetuity. Bingo is a game people play to socialise and gamble amongst their communities, often at churches or recreation centres. The arbitrary call of numbers is a play on the idioms 'Their number was up' or 'Their number was called', expressions for when someone dies or faces significant consequences.

Manhatta

Impulsively, Bacher boarded a seaplane in Manhattan. Once above the city, she videotaped the buildings below. *Manhatta* (1999) hovers over, zooms into and fractures the unfolding panorama of New York into frayed pixels. Such rippling pixelation was not premeditated, but only a happy accident. Bacher transferred the videotape to DVD in reverse and anomalous, glitching playback appeared. Like other moments of disruption and decay in this exhibition, Bacher used the defect to evoke feeling, much like how distortion is used in music. The artwork takes on other contours when the World Trade Center towers come into view, totally intact. It is eerie how Bacher's footage carries around its edges the luminous ring of coincidence, fate or premonition, how it evokes but does not show that great historical trauma and how it calls to mind all the other operational footage we have seen from drones, flight decks and other crafts of violence.

Smoke

Smoke (1976) is a self-portrait of Bacher performing simple movements in a studio.



Smoke (detail), 1976
Collection of Stephen Cheng, Hong Kong

Chess

In *Chess* (2012), a cast of found figures stand atop a chess-board floor that seems to dissociate into pixelated grayscale. Two human-scale chess pieces, a camel, Elvis Presley and a Tyrannosaurus rex all confront a found re-creation of Marcel Duchamp's readymade *Bicycle Wheel*, while Elvis sings falsetto on loop. In Bacher's unpublished notes, she recalls how she did not come up with the idea and then buy the components. Instead, she discovered the pieces one by one in the rooms of her house, realising that a game of chess was already taking shape around her.

Big Boy

Big Boy (1992) is a re-creation of an anatomically complete doll used in therapeutic contexts related to child abuse that Bacher had fabricated at enlarged scale.



Big Boy, 1992
Private Collection

Little People

Working with a studio photographer and a rare industrial-sized 20-×-24-inch Polaroid camera, Bacher posed and lit troll dolls like movie stars, resulting in *Little People* (2005).

Bison (2012), *Boyfriends* (2006),
Levi's 2 (2018), *Life Form* (2018), *Orb* (2008),
Tank (2008), *Untitled (Parent/Child)* (2019),
Untitled (Snow White) (2009), *Wham* (2016),
Whiteboard (2018), *Woodman* (2015), *World* (2003)



Untitled (Parent/Child), 2019
Collection of Dr. Alfred Gillio and
Paul Bernstein, New York

These found sculptures were embraced by Bacher as discarded objects from the world, a bizarre universe of items from our strange consumerist age. Such objects were residents of Bacher's home studio, at times a kind of stage on which things came to new life. She often arranged them in groups of colour or provocative combinations. How were such materials chosen? They gravitated to her; she had an instinct for the improbable, orphaned beauty, hilarity and pathos. What was finally chosen only had to emote, provoke laughter or move Bacher in some way. Meeting the form and pressure of the age was one thing, but it was also Bacher's belief that if by chance she caught something unexpected and it moved her, it in turn could do the same to you: a simple system of faith. But it is perhaps here where one can sense Bacher's philosophy for art, her drift and her openness to question what could become a part of any one artistic sign or language. There is a reality beyond the ordinary, a poetic, as opposed to a prosaic, view of the world, an unpremeditated outlook relying on a spontaneous revelation of the real and the thing.

Men at War

Men at War (1975) consists of nine photographs, all printed by Bacher from the same found negative, but each focusing on a different crop or detail. The pictures show a group o smiling bathers, presumably US soldiers, one of them with the disturbing mark of a swastika barely visible on his chest. The origin of the photographic negative is unknown, but it depicts soldiers off-duty finding sociality amid war in a theme that Bacher would return to throughout her life. If history is visible here, it is submerged, stuttering and unresolved.



Men at War, 1975
Courtesy the Estate of Lutz Bacher and Galerie Buchholz

Olympiad

Olympiad (1997) is a videotape of Bacher touring the 1936 stadium in Berlin, where Leni Riefenstahl made her infamous film of the same name during the Nazi Olympic games. The record of Bacher's visit is complicated by a technical accident. The tape she had used turned out to be faulty, giving the video a jagged, sputtering rhythm as if it were inhabited by disturbances. Bacher tried to correct the tape, yet more distortions worked their way into the picture, intensifying while also unsettling the classicist, idealist aspirations of this pompous site. What today might appear like a choice, a quick digital effect, was rather a spook of technology – the articulation of material breaking down.

Bien Hoa

Bien Hoa (2006/2016) is made from ten found photographs taken by Walter, a US soldier stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base during the Vietnam War. Walter inscribed the backs of all but two of the pictures before mailing them home to a romantic interest.

The Celestial Handbook

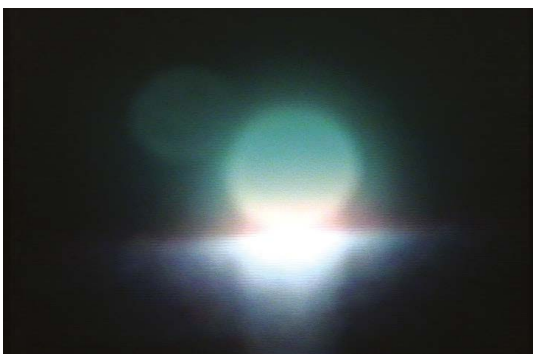
The Celestial Handbook (2011) consists of book pages that illustrate galaxies, nebulae, comets and cosmic phenomena. The pages have been collected from an amateur's compendium about astronomy from the 1960s. The captions beneath the images are more poetic than scientific, revealing an elegiac tone and confirming the impossible, self-contradicting project to explain things that cannot be adequately explained. In the same space, *The Celestial Handbook* is juxtaposed with hundreds of *Stress Balls* (2012) scattered across the floor.



The Celestial Handbook, 2011
Courtesy the Estate of Lutz Bacher and Galerie Buchholz

Black Beauty
Blue Moon

Black Beauty (2012) is the setting for *Blue Moon* (1996) – a video Bacher shot of the moon through the window of her house in Berkeley, California. The camera searches for the moon, catching its refraction through the windowpane and camera lens, and giving us a second moon, smaller and clearer. The two moons become a stimulating pair drawing closer and pulling apart without much plot. Sounds from Bacher's domestic life sneak into the tape. The TV plays, floorboards creak, bottles clink and the sounds of Bacher and her husband, an astrophysicist, signal their absence. As refrains of the song 'Danny Boy' and other ambient sounds are heard in the distance, the light of the moon hovers at the extreme edge of the frame, leaving an almost empty black image on the TV monitor, something like a void.



Blue Moon, 1996
Courtesy the Estate of Lutz Bacher and Galerie Buchholz

Bacher first installed these two works together in 2013, just a few months after she had paired *The Celestial Handbook* with *Stress Balls*. In the last decade of her life, Bacher made a number of ambitious installations at great scale. Often these installations took up the imagery of the deep past or the celestial.

Sweet Jesus

On the rooftop terrace, the iconic voice of actor James Earl Jones can be heard in the sound installation *Sweet Jesus* (2016). The voice recites Jesus's paternal lineage down to Joseph from Matthew, Book 1, slowed down and played on loop. In Bacher's artwork, the name of Jesus is omitted entirely.

Do you love me?

Do you love me? (1994) is a 12-hour-long video in which she interviews friends, family, artists and colleagues about Lutz Bacher. Though she is the starting point, *Do you love me?* often reveals more about the person being interviewed than it does about Bacher herself.



Do you love me, 1994
Courtesy the Estate of Lutz Bacher and Galerie Buchholz

Watch the video here.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lutz Bacher (1943–2019, US) lived and worked between Berkeley and New York. Solo exhibitions include: Astrup Fearnley Museet (2025), Oslo; Raven Row (2023), London; Fridericianum (2021), Kassel; Treize (2022), Paris; K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (2018), Düsseldorf; Lafayette Anticipations (2018), Paris; KADIST (2017), San Francisco; Secession (2016), Vienna; Greene Naftali (2015–16), New York; Kunsthalle Zürich (2013); ICA London (2013); and MoMA PS1 (2009), New York. Her work is in the collections of major museums around the world. Her archive, organised from the 1970s onward in what she titled *The Betty Center* is installed in New York City and maintained and overseen by Galerie Buchholz (Berlin, Cologne, New York) in conjunction with the Estate of Lutz Bacher.

Curators:
Helena Kritis with co-curator Solveig Øvstebø

Lutz Bacher: Burning the Days is organised in collaboration with Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo, where the exhibition was on view 26 September 2025 – 4 January 2026

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The Estate of Lutz Bacher, Galerie Buchholz

PUBLIC PROGRAMME

25/04
16:00–17:00
Look Who's Talking
with Helena Kritis (EN)

23/05
15:00–16:00
Look Who's Talking
with Sara Deraedt (NL)

03/06
19:00–20:00
Lecture by
Alex Kitnick (EN)

06/06
15:00–16:00
Look Who's Talking with
Athony Huberman (EN)

13/06
15:00–16:00
Look Who's Talking
with Madeleine
Planeix-Crocker (FR)

01/04, 06/05,
03/06, 01/07, 05/08
18:00–21:00
Free nocturnes: guided
tours, chess tournaments
and screenprinting
workshops

13/06, 27/06,
11/07, 25/07, 08/08
14:00–15:30
Visit & Practice
(NL/FR/EN)

24/04, 29/05, 26/06, 31/07
09:00–11:30
Morning Routine

Every first and third Sunday
of the month
14:00–15:00
Family Funday (NL/FR)

Stay updated on the public
programme or book your
guided tour via wiels.org

PUBLICATION

A comprehensive monograph designed by Julie Peeters and published by ROMA Publications is scheduled for June 2026, featuring new essays by art historian Kate Nesin, writer Emily LaBarge, and philosopher Juliane Rebentisch.

WIELS

Organised in collaboration with
Astrup Fearnley Museet

Chess, 2012
Raf Simons Collection Antwerp



Galerie Buchholz