

Beneath the Beach, the Stars

An Interview With Christine Negus

by Clint Enns

Christine Negus is a visual artist from London, Ontario whose work is at once strange, jarring, humorous, and intense. Her videos make the audience laugh—often uncomfortably—at the macabre and absurd, tackling such taboo subjects as loneliness, death and perversion. Using strategies of irony, satire and humour, Negus’ videos create tensions within the viewer, forcing them to work through and confront trauma. At the same time, the videos offer both catharsis and consolation, reminding the viewer that they are not alone in experiencing this trauma. In September, Negus and I discussed her work over e-mail. This interview is an edited version of these discussions.

Clint Enns: How did you begin making videos?

Christine Negus: I began working with video during my second year of undergrad. I was enrolled in a sculpture/installation/performance class, and I began to make small, intimate recordings of myself doing various tasks as a way of avoiding live performances. At that time I was really into the masochistic performance art of the '70s, with a particular interest in Vito Acconci and repetitive, futile actions.

It is also possible to see the influence of Steve Reinke in your work, both in terms of form and content. In particular, I am thinking about your use of irony, your use of fragmentation, and your DIY approach to video production. Can you talk about your experience studying with Steve?

In my fourth year, I was studying with multi disciplinary artist David Poolman, who suggested that I try using text and narrative as a new way to approach video. At the time, David provided me with a task that I have carried with me and contemplate often. I had acquired footage of a man who was simultaneously playing the drums, guitar, and singing. It was quite absurd. David agreed that the footage was unique and it would be easy to make fun of the “character,” but much harder to make the audience sympathize or even identify with him. This mode of disrupting hope or normalized expectations is one that I continually employ when figuring out how to combine image, text, and sound.

David first introduced me to the works of Steve Reinke, and I went to Northwestern specifically to study with him. His unique approach to narrative structure and the mechanisms at work in monologue-based essay videos provided the model of rigor I needed. During a particularly harrowing time in my first year, I brought him a bad video and his response was: “Well, a video has to do something, and your video does nothing.” It was perfectly Steve and perfectly on point.

Can you talk about some of your other inspirations?

I often take influence (formally and thematically) from various pop cultural phenomena including television, monsters, Wikipedia articles about serial killers, and news stories that range anywhere from angry women to perverts.

Can you talk about the role of performance in your video work? Is this something you have moved away from?

I came into video via performance. My body performed the role of meaning-maker. When I moved away from being the physical performer and started working with narrative I used my voice instead of my body to create meaning in the work. Starting with my own voice, I later began to alter it either digitally or naturally by trying to imitate how other people speak (like kid play or temporal drag). This took the monologues away from being entirely self-reflexive. Working with animation furthered this strategy.

I haven’t worked with many performers, as I find it odd directing people. I want a specific action or dictation, and I’ve found it hard to articulate that to and then illicit it from performers in the past. Despite wanting to continually alienate myself from the work, I find it is still deeply engaged with ideas of female authorship and ownership.

Do the images come before your texts or vice versa?

The writing for *host or ghost* (2013) generated the search for the images. For some reason I thought the audio for those Christian cartoons—the ones where the vegetables talk—could be interesting to manipulate, but after finding one, it just didn’t work (it later became the background piano track). Later, on Facebook, a friend had posted something weird their kid had said: “Dad, I hope your eyeballs fall out and roll into the sea!” The text was born from that. I like the subtle aggression of emptying forms and filling them back up—it forces multiple ways of seeing and reading the work. The mutability of the thing or form is fertile, and in this work it’s like a delightful, perverted circle of life. With *BLUEWATER* (2007) and *stillborns* (2010), the texts were also written in advance of the footage.

In contrast, *FROZEN GIANTS* (2013) was made at a residency in Nova Scotia where I recorded on a fossil-infested beach without an endgame. It was special, because by the sea, you walk down the seashore and there are just piles of dead things. The writing was derived from the images months later.

At some point, I would like to put together a book of texts. I haven’t published much at this point, only *The Loneliest Animals* in



Christine Negus, better than awful (but still pretty shitty), still, 2015.

“Blast Counterblast” (Mercer Union, 2011, edited by Steve Reinke and Anthony Elms) and two pieces in the online literary and arts journal “The Rusty Toque.” I have lots of writing that has yet to find a video home.

Is there a connection between your use of stars and your use of the sea? Both seem to be connected to anxieties surrounding death and decay. In fact, in *for, like ever* (2010), the omnipresent stars even address the sea’s murderous nature.

In my work, sea and sky act as deep recesses (like in *FROZEN GIANTS* and *host or ghost*) and expansive but flat, superficial voids (like in *for, like ever* or *secret galaxy* (2009)). They can be vacuously empty or writhing with invisible alien forms. All of these options are terrifying. The works play with these various states of being and nothingness and the anxieties they generate. They tauntingly suggest a “beyond” and then reveal it to be a cruel joke. The anxieties are often mitigated by various comforts—the brilliant celestial showers of a comet careening towards earth, like in *better than awful (but still pretty shitty)* (2015); or drowning likened to a reunion with dead family members. These various but futile distractions provide some semblance of pleasure in the face of the nebulous oblivion that is waiting both below and above.

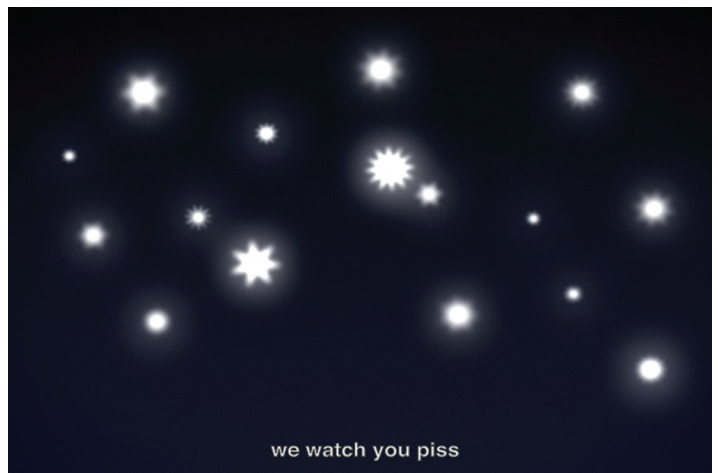
In contrast, many of the sections in *BLUEWATER* are simply documents of living in Northern Ontario. In the opening section of *BLUEWATER*, you explore “photographic slides” of your grandmother’s house filled with strange and kitschy objects common to many homes in Northern Ontario. Where did you find the video in the second section, the footage of the high school kids? It totally reminds me of my own childhood. Is this a ready-made? Can you talk about the Christmas footage, where the line-up of cars visiting a Christmas town becomes of more interest than the houses themselves?

The work exploits the “this could be anywhere”-ness of the images and plays on the sentiments of individuals that have any sort of connection with small town living. As for the high school footage, I had just broken up with someone; and while packing their stuff, I came across a Hi8 tape. The tape itself would flicker between a track meet, a bad piano recital with three people in the audience, and mock interviews conducted by a kid in a lab coat. I loved this because as children, my sisters, friends, and I would host Maury Povich and Jerry Springer-like talk shows, or replicate those law firm advertisements where people wear neck braces. In *BLUEWATER* the original footage was edited.

At one time there was a Christmas town in the Bluewater Township; however, I couldn’t find any visual evidence of it. Instead, I used a news report of a similar town as a stand-in. The story seemed perfectly unsatisfying. It replicated my interest and focus on narrative—continually waiting for something to happen, and when it does, finding it much less fulfilling than desired. I edited this footage, leaving only a few of the interviews as voice-overs. I especially like the one about the people getting lost, which references my interest in narrative derailment.

The scene in *BLUEWATER* with the missed call regarding the death of your grandmother that disrupts your orgasm seems to combine two of your preoccupations: death and unfulfilled desire.

This scene sets up an expectation, or anti-expectation, that is continued throughout the video: in the footage of pathetic ways to ask someone to the prom, the high jumper poised on the edge of movement waiting to jump, a long line for a Christmas town that is probably not worth the wait, and a bug that spends its days walking without getting anywhere. It’s not necessarily the preoccupation with death but a fear that there may be no payoff, or nothing is really worth it—like a joke without a punchline. This makes the video sound more depressing than it is, but there is definitely humour hiding in there.



Top to bottom: *BLUEWATER*, still, 2007; *host or ghost*, still, 2013; we can't see their shape from this far away, but we can hear them, still, 2009; *Slit Me a River*, still, 2013.

You often explore taboo subject matters in your work. For example, in *stillborns*, (2010), two boys play a game of grotesque one-upmanship in which books are described as stillborn babies. The game reaches its climax when one of the boys offers up a potentially made-up scene in which he spits in the face of his mother. His friend, acting as the surrogate audience, is both disgusted and horrified by his friend's story. What is your intent in making these types of subversive works?

It may be sadistic to try and make people take pleasure in terrible things or to open up old wounds, but it is also productive. The works question normalized responses to fear, anxiety, longing, desire, frustration and rage. More specifically, the work confronts these normalized responses to trauma from a feminist and queer perspective. The question that I often contemplate is: what does it truly mean to NOT *deal* with trauma, but to live with it? What does it mean in today's society for a woman to aggressively reject resilience—to even laugh at it—instead of simply moving on and forgetting?

Self-solace, resting in peace, the hope that “it all gets better” or “the past is behind us,” come under siege in my practice as I happily break down these (futile) comforts. The fallacy of resilience and the redemptive potential of humour work in tandem as I reclaim trauma and confront pain, all while undermining emotional sentiment. Each work is irreverent and nihilistic; however, it is possible to complicate these relationships by employing playful tactics (that include subversion and irony).

Your work often contains children. What role do you see children playing in your work?

Children are truth-speakers. They are also vessels, as well as portals. I see them as innocent mouths to fill up with my desires and thoughts.

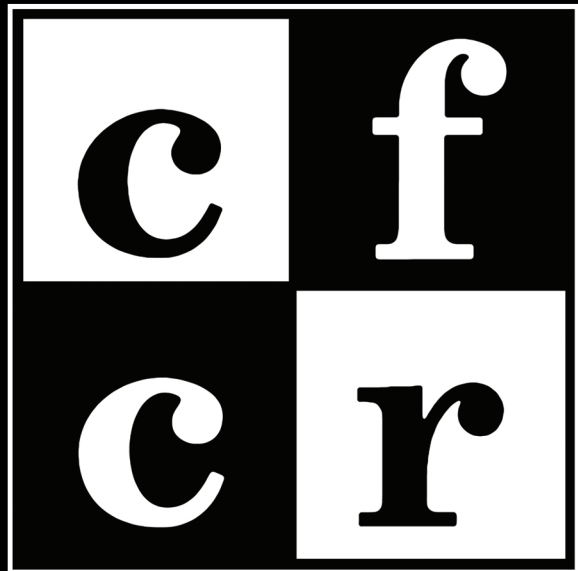
In addition to children, your work often contains ghosts: the physical embodiment of the past haunting the present. Can you talk about the role that ghosts play in your work?

A ghost is something that has been. It is a marker for “that which was” and “that which isn't.” It is diametrically opposed to that which is living and present to a person. A ghost is the “literalized” presence of absence. It is one of the few physical markers for loss, because only in its presence can it really state its absence. A present “ghost” is the marker of lack.

In the works, ghosts are often presented as material objects. For instance, consider the two ghosts in *our home* (2013). I made the ghosts first, and the house was an afterthought that occurred while buying glitter at Michaels. They needed something to haunt, of course, and the moment I saw the miniature house, I knew I wanted to burn it to the ground while the ghosts watched.

Ghosts in my work are merely surface—there is no beyond; there is no transcendence. They laugh in the face of life after death. They are both comedy and tragedy. In general, I find the idea of hauntings romantic, just like the idea of a stalker is kind of endearing. They are all about desire and longing ... a ghost is a surrogate for these things. Of course, they are also metaphorical and represent things that can't just be subsumed into the oblivion of forgetting. I have never seen a ghost, but I do believe they could exist. I definitely have plans for when I become one.

Clint Enns is a video artist and filmmaker living in Toronto, Ontario. His work primarily deals with moving images created with broken and/or outdated technologies. His work has shown both nationally and internationally at festivals, alternative spaces and microcinemas. His writings and interviews have appeared in Leonardo, Millennium Film Journal, Incite! Journal of Experimental Media and Spectacular Optical.



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