

# MPA

GALERIA MOISES PEREZ DE ALBENIZ

## DENNIS ADAMS

*BAD GIRLS*

25 March - 27 May 2023

*You know the old story about the chameleon.  
Put her on green, she turns green.  
Put her on red, she turns red.  
But if you put her on plaid—she explodes.*  
—Jean Seberg

**BAD GIRLS** brings together a selection of works by the American artist Dennis Adams, that include photographs, text-based works on paper, videos, and installations. These artworks address the agency of women, who through their resistance to colonization, misogyny, social conformity, and/or other forms of repression—have invented dangerous forms of subterfuge that operate in the gaps between reality, fiction, and imagination.

The exhibition groups together artworks produced over a twenty-five-year period, that address troubled women in various contexts—including Patricia Hearst, Jean Seberg, Jane Fonda, Ulrike Meinhof, and Djamila Bouhired, the Algerian militant, who along with her female collaborators was depicted in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. And finally—as if to bracket the exhibition, Adams has included Lola Gaos' frightening depiction of the devouring Mother in José Luis Borau's film *Furtivos*—extracting the film frames from the scene of her killing an injured she-wolf—and scattering them across the gallery's façade and floor.

As an artist with a long history in the production of public works that challenge the context of their sites, Adams has from his very first work that touched on this subject: *Patricia Hearst A thru Z*, identified with the subversive methodologies and actions of these women—both as role models for his own strategies of rethinking and restructuring ideas of resistance—as well as his direct appropriation of their images as surrogates for himself—as demonstrated in the videos *Outtake* and *Make Down*.

### **PATRICIA HEARST - A THRU Z**

Surfacing in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, the images of Patricia Hearst circulated through our consciousness like psychological fallout, replaying America's identity crisis via the multiple and contradictory personas of a young newspaper heiress turned revolutionary terrorist. The image of Patricia Hearst -invented and reinvented by her parents, the SLA, the FBI, lawyers, and psychiatrists and then filtered through a media blitz- overloaded the circuits of representation. Dennis Adams alphabetized twenty-six headshots that trace the events of her transformation, from her First Communion at thirteen through her marriage to her bodyguard.

On February 4, 1974, Patricia Hearst, the 19-year-old granddaughter of newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, is kidnapped from her apartment in Berkeley, California, by three armed strangers. Three days later, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a U.S. leftist group announced they were holding Hearst as a prisoner of war. The story takes an unexpected turn when, on April 15, 1974, Hearst is recorded on surveillance video while robbing a bank in San Francisco. Identified as "Tania" yelling "I'm Tania. Up, up, up against the wall, motherfuckers". Through the press images that Dennis Adams uses, we can follow Patty's story until she's arrested and convicted for the crime of bank robbery and sentenced to 35 years imprisonment. But she only served 22 months since president Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence. And later, in 2001, President Bill Clinton granted Patricia Hearst's pardon.

## **BLACKFACE**

In *BLACK FACE* thirty declassified documents from Jean Seberg's FBI file are reprinted at their original size on mirrors. The contents of these documents uncover the FBI's monitoring of Seberg's political, financial, and sexual involvement with the Black Panthers and the smear campaign that FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover generated with the news media to destroy her. These documents are graphically layered with both the FBI's deletion markings of censored information and the reproduction scars generated from their serial photocopying as they were passed between government agencies. In reprinting the documents on mirrors, Adams compounds their graphic layering with the viewer's reflection.

Jean Seberg was born and raised in Marshalltown, Iowa. She was only seventeen in 1955 when she was chosen from thousands of hopeful young actresses by director Otto Preminger to star as Joan of Arc in his film adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*. In Seberg's next film, *Bonjour Tristesse*, also directed by Preminger, her role as a spoiled pixyish adolescent vacationing with her playboy father on the French Riviera-inspired a young Godard to cast her opposite Belmondo in *Breathless*, which would become a *Nouvelle Vague* sensation. In the late 60s and early 70s, Seberg's political empathy and sexual relationship with Hakim Jamal, a charismatic player in the Black Power movement, as well as her financial support of the Black Panther Party led the FBI to monitor her activities and smear her reputation in the media. She never fully recovered from the scandal and over the next several years became increasingly dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs. On September 9, 1979, Jean Seberg was found dead in her parked car in a Paris suburb. The autopsy revealed she had overdosed on barbiturates and alcohol. After a lengthy investigation, her death was ruled a suicide by the Paris police.

## **BLACK BELMONDO**

Adams manipulates the last shot of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, where Patricia, played by Jean Seberg, traces the outline of her lips with her thumb in an imitation of her dead lover, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo. He had appropriated the gesture from Humphrey Bogart in one of Godard's playful references to Hollywood cinema. Adams extends the evolution of this layered gesture, by transforming it into a rendering of blackface, suggesting a link to Seberg's real-life identification with the Black Panthers.

## **MAKE DOWN**

The *MAKE DOWN* video consists of a single, fixed shot that lasts twenty-three minutes: a close-up of the artist looking at himself in a mirror as he carefully removes a thick layer of makeup from his face, hair, and torso. The makeup is a drab olive color suggestive of military camouflage. Each of the pieces of paper that he uses to wipe off the makeup is printed with one of a linear sequence of ninety-six film stills.

The sequence of stills depicts a shot from Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* which shows a young Algerian woman removing her veil as she prepares to transform herself into a cosmopolitan French beauty. Once disguised, she will pass undetected through a military checkpoint and plant a bomb in the French quarter of Algiers. Released in 1965 and initially banned in France, *The Battle of Algiers* has long been a cinematic primer on *guerilla* tactics, avant-garde political action, and feminist practice. Since 9/11 the film has become an essential case study for both Islamic terrorists and Western security forces.

*MAKE DOWN* addresses the complexity of layers of representation contained in this one cinematic fragment from *The Battle of Algiers*, particularly in the context of the ongoing transformations of the historical conflict between Islamic and Western cultures. Instead of presuming to unravel these meanings, Adams chooses instead to locate himself between the frames of the image in a reverse reenactment of the process of disguise.

## **OUTTAKE**

In 1969, Ulrike Meinhof, who was then working as a journalist in Berlin, was commissioned by the Südwestfunk, a German state television network, to write a film script for a docudrama addressing the dynamics of authority and resistance in a state-run orphanage for adolescent girls. Entitled, *Bambule*, a word of African origin meaning: "dance" or "riot," the film was completed in early 1970, under the direction of Eberhard Itzenplitz, who worked closely with Meinhof on production decisions. Just prior to its release in the spring of the same year, the film was shelved by German television authorities when it was suspected that Meinhof had participated in the escape of RAF leader Andreas Baader from state prison. The film was censored on German television for the next twenty-five years.

Outtake is composed of a single shot extracted from Meinhof's film, showing a frantic adolescent girl being chased through the corridors of the orphanage by two nuns. Approximately 17 seconds in length, the shot was divided into 416 individual film stills and given out by Adams, one by one in their original sequence, to passersby on Berlin's Kurfürstendamm. A mini digital video camera attached directly to Adams' arm, recorded closeups of the ongoing hand-to-hand transactions. Given the unpredictability of the time needed to hand out the film stills, Meinhof's footage reshapes through a new rhythm and duration. Delays generated by refusals and hesitations are contrasted by quick grabs. The cinematic suspense of the original shot is filtered through the slower and more erratic suspense of the recorded hand-to-hand distribution. 17 seconds of film action is painstakingly drawn out into a 136-minute video.

### **WALKING ON WOLVES**

*WALKING ON WOLVES* is composed of photographic enlargements of 1.328 sequential film frames, representing just under one minute of running time. The frames—each of which has been printed individually—are scattered across the entire floor of the gallery in clusters of shots. The sequence is extracted from *Furtivos* (Poachers), 1975, and spans one of the most savage and hauntingly beautiful scenes in the history of Spanish cinema. Against the backdrop of a lush autumn forest, the camera tracks a folkloric old hag tending her animal traps; the scene reaches its climax in her brutal attack on an injured she-wolf she finds caught in one of them.

*Furtivos* was released at the apex of the cultural permissiveness that had been building in the drawn-out months leading to Franco's death, in the fall of 1975. Directed by José Luis Borau and co-written by Borau and Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, the story was conceived as an allegory that would test the limits of official censorship. The film embodies the last throes of Franco's brutal legacy through its depiction of incest and cruelty in its peasant characters. Borau's choice of the forest as the backdrop for his story challenged Franco's myth of Spain as a "peaceful forest" and undermined the Caudillo's use of hunting expeditions as propaganda in an attempt to create the illusion of his continuing prowess in the face of rumors of his failing health.

*Walking on Wolves* pulls the eye of the viewer to the ground and puts his or her feet in a direct physical confrontation with the images. Time, shifting perspectives, and a chance encounter function as perceptual triggers that continually redirect the gaze downward.