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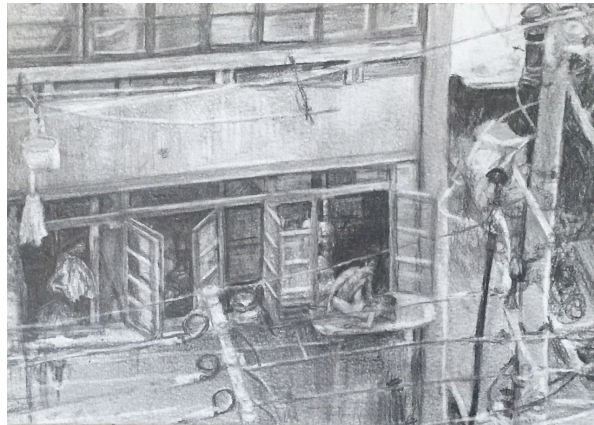
# HYPERALLERGIC

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## Angela Dufresne Has a Big Heart

by [John Yau](#) on April 10, 2016



Angela Dufresne, "Cookie Von Mueller and Her Line Cook" (2003), graphite on paper, 7 x 10 1/4 inches (click to enlarge) (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects/SHFAP)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's groundbreaking study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) opens with a succession of axioms. This is the first one in its entirety:

*Axiom 1: People are different from each other.*

It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions. They, with the associated demonstrations of the mechanisms by which they are construed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity. But the brother or sister, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enemies alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species.

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I was reminded of “Axiom 1” when I went to see [Angela Dufresne: \*Pleasure Tips: drawings and videos, 2003 – 2016\*](#) at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (March 16–April 17, 2016). I knew that I would have to go back and check whether Sedgwick ended her first axiom with the phrase “different species” after looking at two charcoal drawings, “Jennifer Coates as a Chimera or Something” (2015) and “Hi, What’s Your Name” (2016). Dufresne depicted Coates as full-breasted human seated on animal haunches, more satyr than fire-breathing hybrid creature, while in “Hi, What’s Your Name (2016), she drew a six-breasted creature — half-human and half furry animal with an erect penis — lying on its back, as canines often do when they want their belly rubbed.

In another group of drawings, many of which are aerial views — as if Dufresne were Google Earth, a benign drone, or an angel flying overhead — she depicts a couple having sex on what looks like a shallow bathtub or table mysteriously attached to the edge of a tenement window. We spy on what is transpiring between power lines connected to a telephone pole. In another drawing — humorously titled “Kris Kristofferson + Me in Utah – c. 1988” (2005) — a couple (presumably the singer-songwriter-actor and the artist) is relaxing on the front hood of a jeep, which is stopped on a stretch of road, rolling hills in the distance. In still another drawing, a couple is having sex in the back of a van, its side door pulled back, so that they are facing the street. Another man has opened the van’s back doors and presumably has a different view of the action.



*Angela Dufresne, “Kris Kristofferson + Me in Utah – c. 1988” (2005),  
graphite on paper, 12 x 16 inches*

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The drawings range from quick sketches to tightly rendered scenes. Dufresne is remarkably deft in her handling of charcoal, graphite, watercolor and pen. She has an eye for detail and seems able to conjure up complicated dramatic scenes whenever she wants. You get the feeling that she can draw in whatever style she feels will work and that she isn't tied to making a signature mark. Her ability to evoke sexual fantasies and describe weirdly charged scenes places her in a select group of figurative artists that includes Nicole Eisenman, Judith Linhares and Dana Schutz. In different ways, they seem to have their fingers on the pulse of the cataclysmic changes America has been undergoing, as signaled by Sedgwick's foundational book, which helped begin the field of queer studies. Sedgwick was one of the first to advance that it was limiting to define sexuality in the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality. In "Two Gals" (2015), two young women — each carrying a shopping bag — hold hands. Are they sisters, friends, or lovers? Do we need to know? Well, if you are nosy, like a concierge, I suppose you do. In the watercolor "Hannah" (2007), dabs of yellow endow the figure seen in profile, seated by a window, with an inner light. She is palpable and remote, physical and intangible.



*Angela Dufresne, "Hannah" (2007), work on paper, 14 x 20 inches*

Dufresne's drawings are humorous, whimsical, tender, odd, sarcastic, fantastic, sympathetic, and sweet. She celebrates the wacky and wonderful side of human behavior when overtaken by erotic passion, as well as reaches inexplicable places in our imagination. A car, which has driven into the side of a cabin cruiser, is precariously suspended between the boat and the waterside parking lot. Its door is open and the driver is treading water just beneath the car. Meanwhile, a family of three stands near the water, gawking at a fish the mother is holding. She

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is positioned between the man and boy, a pile of large fish at their feet. A dog stands beside the fish. You have the feeling that they are as harebrained as what is going on beside them — that this situation would fit in to one Buster Keaton's outlandish films or a screwball comedy that Carole Lombard starred in the 1930s. The scene is both ludicrous and plausible, which is really what gives these drawings their edge. They are all believable, even the ones that aren't.

Along with these drawings, Dufresne is presenting a loop of nine music videos in which she is the star — lying in bed, playing an electric guitar, singing, cooking sausages on a wood burning heater, walking through a cornfield, trout fishing in waders. The scenes jump from one rural locale and oddly appropriate costume to another, all while she continues to sing the same song: seated on a couch, petting her amazingly calm dog, while a few feet away she appears again, only this time she's nude. The scenes follow no logical order. Instead they drift and, at times, Dufresne appears in three different roles and outfits simultaneously. The videos run from under three minutes to more than nine. If I were to say that they are bizarre, curious, satiric, self-mocking, nutty, charming, delightful, dissonant and grating, I still wouldn't be doing them justice.



*A still from Angela Dufresne's "The Undead"*

One of the remarkable and enduring pleasures of this exhibition is how many different emotional registers Dufresne is able to touch upon in her work. Unafraid of her feelings, she is able to infuse the raucous and disorderly with exhilarating doses of affection. There is no one making art like her, and it is time more people recognize that.

[Angela Dufresne: Pleasure Tips; drawings and videos, 2003 – 2016](#) continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street Manhattan) through April 17.