



**Lilly McElroy**  
*...tough love*

November 3, 2011- January 29, 2012

SECCA

*I Throw Myself at Men #12* [detail], 2008, Digital Photograph  
Image Courtesy of the Artist



*Pushing Cowboys* [Still], 2004, Video,  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

## ...tough love

Essay by Steven Matijcio

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*Growing up in the Southwest has given me a love for the iconic and the cliché. There is something really beautiful about actually watching someone ride off into the sunset.*

- Lilly McElroy

McElroy grew up in Southern Arizona surrounded by mall-outfitted cowboys, pastel sunsets, vagrant coyotes, full moons and women who, as she describes, “waited” for men. On either side of a hazy simulacrum, she grew up, in her words, “surrounded by cliché representations of my own experience.” It’s thus of little surprise that she freely admits the influence of pop culture on her work, from the novels of Cormac McCarthy and David Foster Wallace, to Tina Fey’s “30 Rock” TV show, to the risqué, post-pop art of Laurel Nakadate and Taylor Baldwin. Yet out of this ersatz arena of the never-had, or impossibly idyllic experience, McElroy seeks to develop honest relationships with others through her work. Through staged public *interactions* (it feels incomplete to categorize them as “performances”), she explains that, despite the spectacle of slapstick, “I



*I Throw Myself at Men #10*, 2007, Digital Photograph  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

am genuinely trying to connect with people.” Across the inherent flubs, rejections and unexpected intimacies that follow, she orchestrates sincere portraits of bonds broken and made.

Eros and pathos swirl in McElroy’s ad hoc theatre of participation, where reaching out requires an earnest effort to “make work in which I’m vulnerable, but not a victim.” Far from passive hope for personal exchange, she mobilizes the desire for interaction into surprisingly physical, often aggressive “outreach.” In describing a colorful body of photos titled *I Throw Myself at Men* (2006–2008) with equally purple prose, critic James Yood observes McElroy, “in flight, seemingly exhilarated, arms and legs akimbo like some Baroque angel transported in ecstasy.” Lost in the intensity of extending our being to another, she mines the intimacy and violence embedded in the anatomy of human relationships. Speaking to the overlaps that can so often blur the lines between amour and antagonism, she explains, “I’m interested in how similar loving and aggressive gestures can be.” In so doing, McElroy re-opens the knotty complexity of interpersonal actions that are too often defined (and



*Hugs* [Still], 2005, Video  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

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simplified) in isolation. Courting ambivalence in emotion, she elaborates: “I am interested in actions that can signify more than one thing; behaviors that are simultaneously loving and cruel.”

The art that comes out of these interests ricochets between, in her words, “physical comedy and earnest confessional.” Each corresponding scenario is inherently different, puncturing the stereotypes (and singularity) of pop culture to animate McElroy’s aim of imbuing cliché with “new and personal meaning.” By confronting this widespread shorthand in such a direct way, she channels a strange, punning alchemy that, for critic Lori Waxman, transforms the gross clichés of heterosexual seduction into something refreshingly unfamiliar. With what Waxman provocatively dubs, “the magic power of the literal,” McElroy cracks open the autonomy of old sayings by making them jarringly *real*. Writer Tal Niv reinforces this observation in his description of McElroy’s multi-faceted leap in the aforementioned */ Throw Myself at Men* series, when stating, “This is a kamikaze leap; a here-goes-nothing moment, so utterly serious that it becomes parody.” In its unabashed enactment of heretofore coy euphemisms, this work is less a



*The Square (After Roberto Lopardo)* [Still], 2004, Video  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

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question of piercing false constructions, than embracing them for unexpected insight. By re-routing the circuitous platitudes of innuendo, metaphor, and the unsaid into explicit territory, McElroy rewrites social script by realizing its suggestion.

In the seemingly straightforward acts of pitching herself at men, pushing cowboys, hugging (or at least, *trying* to hug) strangers, and enforcing the borders of a public square, McElroy folds cliché back upon itself and reaps the repercussions. Shaking the ingrained foundations of popular stereotypes, she makes each assumption simultaneously more sinister and benign. Pushing people out of an arbitrarily drawn square on a public sidewalk is the epitome of imperial aggression, but what happens when it's done with a knowing smile, and the acquiesce of unknowing bystanders? Colliding with men she barely knows in seedy bars can be an empowering post-feminist gesture, but does it push away the possibility for actual intimacy, empathy or love? Interpretive avenues multiply with every additional participant, and McElroy revels in this expanded field where people laugh at "inappropriate things," and the automatic becomes



*2009 was a Rough Year (Stand-Up Comedy), 2009, Performance*  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

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ambivalent. As part of a recent project titled *2009 was a Rough Year*, McElroy asked people to send her jokes she would then perform on open mic nights at New York City comedy clubs. Some were witty, most were tired, clichéd and borderline offensive, but – without revealing their authors, or the nature of the project – she delivered each with the sincere attempt to make the audience laugh. On every stage, whether public, private, or the hybrid terrain between the two, she personalizes the set-up to detour the punchline.

The stage on which the majority of us will “interact” with McElroy is that of photographic or video documentation, emphasizing the fact that most of her attempts at courting connection are framed by, and with the lens. As is the case with much of performance art’s canon, once chaotic, often impromptu events are formalized by the camera and remembered by the images left behind. Photo chronicles are the prevailing, and palpable objects of ephemeral actions – serving (and saving) performance by composing a happening at its allegorical zenith. In this way, in crystallizing the episodic and intangible into an iconic (but inevitably incomplete) surrogate, photo



*Locations (Prada)*, 2004, C-Print  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

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documentation is the action made *literal*. They are the artifacts of acts designed to escape the museum, and yet many of these photos now inhabit the institution. In the process, these images have become a conflicted token for those preferring that performance live on as memory, mythology and story. But what happens when such actions (and more specifically, interactions) are designed for the camera? Akin to artists like Nikki Lee and Larry Clark, McElroy exercises the “magic power of the literal” on the shorthand/cliché that is performance documentation. Whether photo or video, infrared camera in a country western bar, movie camera on the sidewalk, or snapshot flash in a shady saloon, she runs headlong into this polarizing discourse to turn it back upon itself.

Professor and photographer Mark Alice Durant argues that the rationale behind segregating performance (and by extension, social practice) from documentation, was/is to maintain a more “pure, uncompromised form.” In the orthodoxies of authenticity, if photography was permitted, it was there solely to produce an “affectless record, without the taint of style or authorship.” Yet in a contemporary context of the near omnipresent lens –



*Locations (Bedford Avenue)*, 2004, C-Print  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

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from cell phone cameras and webcams to surveillance video and satellite zoom – the entire notion of escaping photographic record is quaint at best. In this light, McElroy embraces the mediated filter of her work as a necessary component of trying to forge relationships in modern life. Moving rapidly from self-consciousness to subconsciousness, our lives are choreographed for inevitable – some would say naturalized – replay. In the millions of YouTube and Ustream videos coalescing with an endless array of reality television shows and Twitter feeds, we have become pop culture; we watch one another; we live (as) clichés. This rampant, yet banal colonization of private space is reflected in McElroy's photo series *Locations* (2004), where she lays supine, in little more than a nightgown, in subway stations, city sidewalks, supermarkets and gas stations. Without injury, shame or alarm, she is serene and susceptible – at home with others on the stage of society. By recognizing this frame, perhaps we can better confront its affect – stretching out the claustrophobic grip of clichés from inside out.

## Artist Bio:



*Into A Bed*, 2006, Lambda Photograph  
Image Courtesy of the Artist

Lilly McElroy was raised in a small town in Southern Arizona where she spent a lot of time at rodeos. She won a few ribbons and once sold a sheep for a decent price. She was formally educated at The University of Arizona, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, The Fine Arts Work Center, and The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. The time spent at those institutions lead to her unabashed interest in the cliché and the literal as well as her often misguided attempts at making authentic connections. She currently resides in Los Angeles where things like sunsets and stained glass windows have become highly important.

-Lilly

## Exhibition Checklist:

*The Square (After Roberto Lopardo)*

2004

Video (28:16)

Collection of the Artist

*Hugs*

2005

Video (5:07)

Collection of the Artist

*Pushing Cowboys*

2005

Video (4:54)

Collection of the Artist

*I Throw Myself at Men*

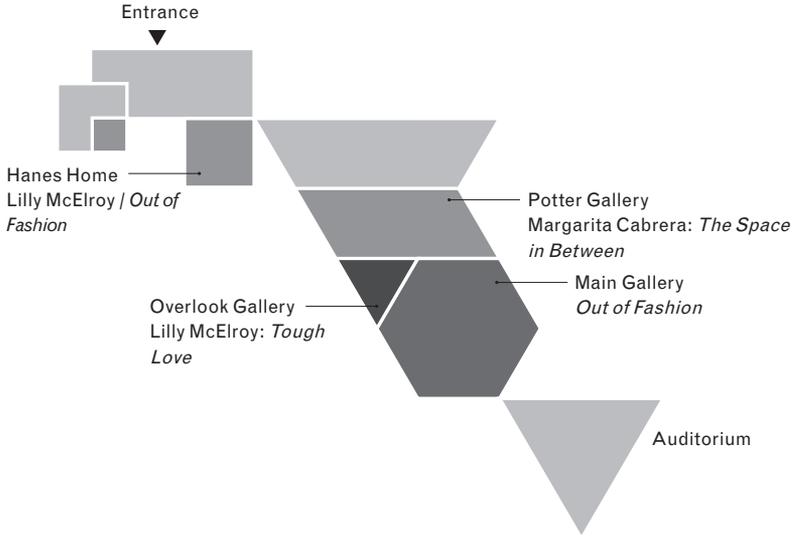
[10 photos from the series: 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / 6 / 8 / 11 / 12 / 13]

2006-2008

Digital Photographs

Collection of the Artist

Curated by Steven Matijcio  
Curator of Contemporary Art, SECCA



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