

FILM

In Her Films, Chris Kraus Revels in Art's Failure

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Jennifer Remenchik 2 days ago



Installation view, Chris Kraus's *In Order to Pass* at Chateau Shatto, Los Angeles (all images courtesy the artist and Chateau Shatto)

LOS ANGELES — At about visit number five my viewership starts to feel like a pilgrimage. Consisting of nine films at a total running time of over three and a half hours, Chris Kraus' solo exhibition *In Order to Pass* at Chateau Shatto requires more than one trip to fully take in. This level of dedication feels both deserved and important as Kraus's films have largely been critically and commercially overlooked. She is primarily known as a writer, particularly for *I Love Dick*, a complicated novel that is simultaneously a memoir, fiction, and criticism, which was later turned into a television series of the same name.

Pilgrimage turns out to be an appropriate word choice. In addition to the slavish devotion Kraus demands from the attentive viewer, *Gravity and Grace* (1996), her last and only feature length film, tackles a decidedly spiritual subject matter. The film takes its name from a compilation of writings by mystic philosopher Simone Weil, and follows its titular characters, Gravity and Grace, through their time in a New Zealand-based cult. While Grace happily stays on with the group, a disaffected Gravity goes on to become an artist in New York City, where she, in keeping with Kraus's oeuvre, fails. During the course of this failure she ends up as dissatisfied by the art world as she was the cult.



Chris Kraus, *Gravity and Grace* (1995) 16mm film transferred to video, 1 hour 29 min

Many of Kraus's characters are failures, both in her writing and films, a designation Kraus seems to revel in rather than revile. *Gravity's* storyline, for instance, suggests the endeavor of art in the contemporary art world is an unsatisfying follow-up to a failed spiritual quest. Yet as the exhibition *In Order to Pass* attests to, Kraus insists that one should go on making and exhibiting art despite the knowledge of this failure. This move fills the air of the gallery with a mixture of disappointment and hope, mirroring her second novel *Aliens & Anorexia*, which, in an autobiographical loop typical of Kraus, takes the commercial and critical failure of *Gravity and Grace* as its narrative starting point.



Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer, *How to Shoot a Crime* (1987) digital video, 28 min 50 sec

As with many life stories the hopeful aspect of the work can be seen mostly in hindsight, while the films' content on their own often feel more nihilistic than inspiring. In *How to Shoot a Crime* (1987) for instance, Kraus's then-husband and co-director, [Sylvère Lotringer](#) interviews a dominatrix with control and intimacy issues. During the interview she seems poised and self-aware, yet in another scene, with her back to the camera, the dominatrix screams at an unknown person on the phone, hardly coming across as a professional in control of herself, let alone her clients. The call ends, presumably with her getting hung up on, and she returns to her interview chair to chug down some rosé and bemoan her state of constant rage.



Chris Kraus, *Foolproof Illusion* (1986) digital video, 17 min 41 sec

Throughout her films Kraus emphasizes the emotional and intellectual complexity of power exchange and its inherently theatrical nature, sometimes to the point of comedic absurdity. Mid-way through *Foolproof Illusion* (1986) a character depicted by Kraus delivers an articulate, intelligent monologue about her relationship to sadomasochism. Yet while

making her statement she dons a ridiculously oversized wig and inexplicably constructs a haphazard outdoor sculpture made from surrounding snow. While cruelty is the topic at hand, the scene comes across as farce, providing the viewer some relief from the serious nature of the topic and work.

In the press release Kraus states that she made the films “to escape from unhappiness (i.e., a surfeit of emotion and content) into happiness (i.e., a clarity or form in which all these fragments of feeling and thought could be magically held)” — a statement as bluntly honest and intellectually verbose as the characters in her work. What they, or rather she, seems to be searching for but never quite finding in totality is a kind of personal transmogrification that leads to lasting deliverance, — artistic, spiritual, sexual, or otherwise — not unlike the one promised to the seeker on a pilgrimage.

In Order to Pass continues at the [Chateau Shatto](#) (1206 South Maple Avenue, Suite 1030, Fashion District, Los Angeles) until June 23.