



ART & EXHIBITS

Images of isolated people yearning to connect strike chord in SF gallery show

Tony Bravo | September 7, 2020 Updated: September 9, 2020, 7:12 am



Mishka Henner's "I'm Not the Only One," a 2015 single-channel video with audio.
Photo: Mishka Henner

The virtual choir, where separate videos of singers are edited together into a unified performance, has become one of the hallmarks of art during shelter-in-place. It is not, however, new to the pandemic.

In 2015 Belgian artist Mishka Henner created a precursor to the phenomenon with his video installation “I’m Not the Only One” by sourcing 18 videos of people singing the Sam Smith song of the same name from YouTube and compiling them into a single presentation.

“Mishka was influenced by reality talent shows and the idea of all these people out there now able to perform for an unknown audience,” says Frish Brandt, president of the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. “Now, we see it as COVID choirs; five years ago we didn’t have that. Who knows what lens we will see it (through) in another 10 or 15 years.”

Although Brandt initially saw the piece in the artist’s studio shortly after it was completed, she says now the experience of being “alone together” that the song and video convey “felt so emblematic of the experience I’d been having these five months working with my team (remotely) where everyone was trying to figure this out. Maybe we’re not singing that song, but we’re alone trying to sing in harmony.”

That contemporary resonance is why Brandt chose to have the video installation as the first piece on display for its new show, which shares the piece’s title. “I’m Not the Only One,” on view starting Tuesday, Sept. 8, by appointment, is a group exhibition curated by Brandt that explores the nature of solitude alongside humanity’s relentless yearning to connect through photographs and videos from 20 artists that echo and reflect the current socially distant world.

In addition to Henner, artists Katy Grannan, Peter Hujar, Diane Arbus, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Robert Adams, Richard Avedon, Nan Goldin and Garry Winogrand are featured in the show, which will also be available for viewing on the Fraenkel Gallery’s **website**.

On Sept. 21, Brandt plans to host a virtual conversation with three of the featured artists — Elisheva Biernoff, Johnnie Chatman and Alec Soth — about art, isolation and connection.



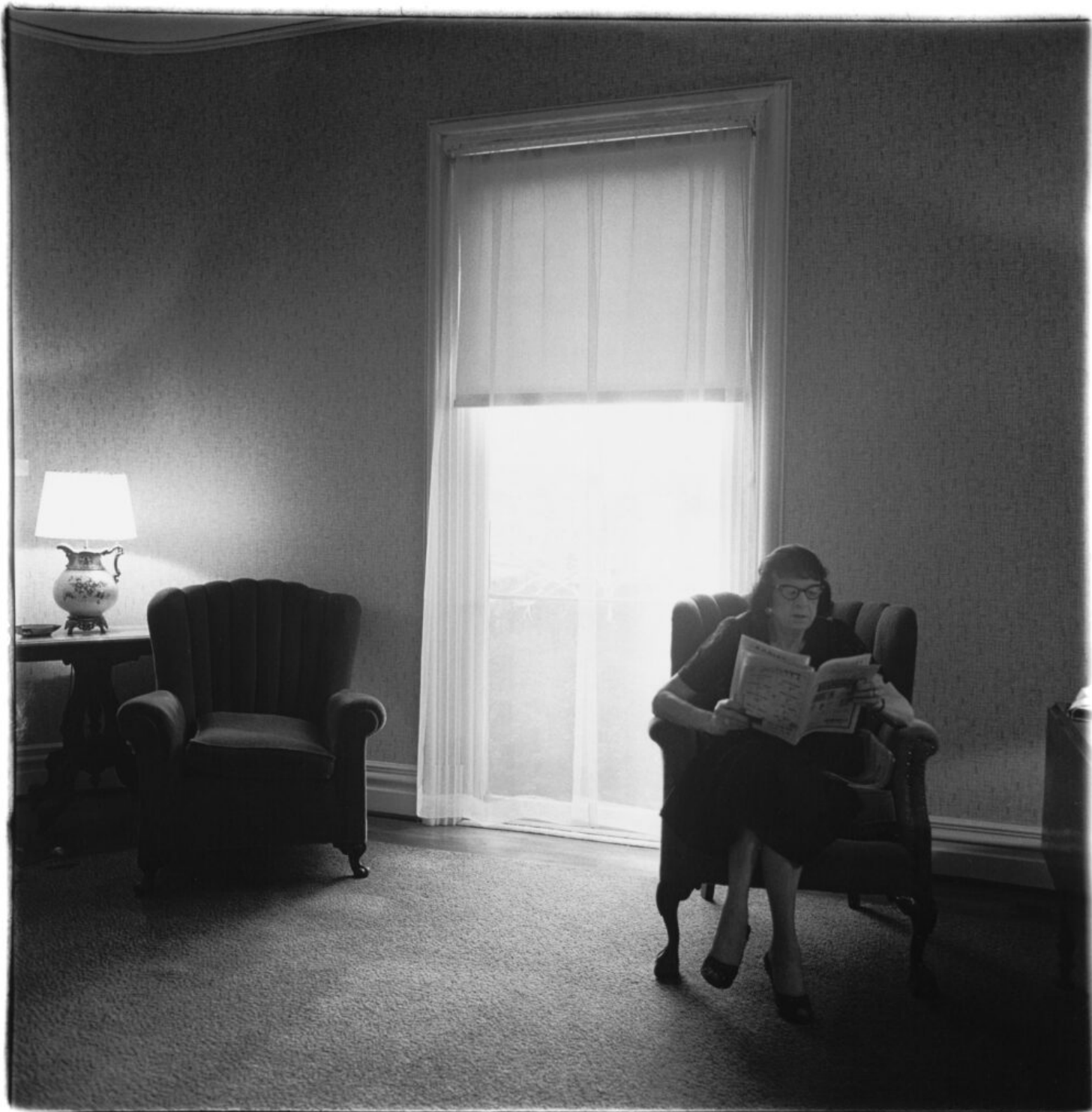
Katy Grannan's "Schatzi, Gerlach, Nevada," 2018 chromogenic print.
Photo: Katy Grannan, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

"I got the idea about isolation and connection *in* isolation, and I started to think what pictures embody that feeling," Brandt says. "It was not all sorrowful."

Among the photos Brandt kept returning to early in the curatorial process was Helen Levitt's "New York," which shows a man sitting on the bumper of a car alone in what appears to be a moment of elation. Brandt didn't want the show's entire approach to the theme to be dark, and she says the question "What are we going to get from this?" remained at the forefront of her mind.

Starting from early examinations of the show's theme, "Frish knew she wanted the feelings you get from the pictures to be multidimensional," notes artist liaison Lexi Brown.

Some photos depict people alone, others have couples or small groups, while some have no people at all. “Some had that sense of ennui but were still celebratory or joyful,” Brown adds.



Diana Arbus' 1963 gelatin silver print titled "Lady in a rooming house parlor, Albion, N.Y."
Photo: The Estate of Diane Arbus

The first of the three rooms in which the show is presented features salon-style hanging, where pictures are grouped together. Several images of solitary women are on view in this section of the show, including Arbus' photo of Coretta Scott King called "Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr. on her front lawn, Atlanta, 1968," which shows the subject gazing skyward with an expression that seems serene but becomes more haunting when you realize the photo was taken months after her husband was assassinated. It's one of several of her photographs in "I'm Not the Only One," appropriate for the exhibition's theme given the photographer's focus on outsider subjects who often existed in their own degrees of social isolation.

Then there's Lee Friedlander's "Galax, Virginia" and "New York City," which put 1960s television sets at the images' focus. In 2020, screens have become "like air, we hardly notice we're looking at screens now," Brandt says, referring to pandemic living in which many of our interactions are conducted via Zoom video calls and just about everything from work to entertainment depends on computer and TV screens.

Soth's 2013 photo "Facebook, Menlo Park, California" shows a lone man walking across the gridded plaza of the tech company's campus, a small figure among the immensity of lines on the ground he treads. Based on the arm and head position of the man in the photo (whom we see from behind), Brandt says he is probably looking at his phone, a subtle nod to yet more screens.



Alec Soth's "Facebook, Menlo Park, California," 2013 pigment print.
Photo: Alec Soth, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

"It was an early anchor in the show for us," says artist liaison Ola Dluosz of the image. "The loneliness of the figure in space, accompanied by shadow, and the movement, has always attracted us to the picture. The figure is walking, but the pose of the body suggests almost a dance through space."

In the second gallery, two photographs by Peter Hujar – "Chuck Gretsch (with Cigar)" and "David Wojnarowicz," both from 1981 – shift the view to male subjects in reclining poses. Paired with them are Nan Goldin's "French Chris on the convertible, NYC" from 1979 showing a young man lying on his back on the hood of a car and Jason Fulford's "Pompeii" from 2010, which shows a woman looking at a glass-encased figure in a similar pose that was preserved in the ash of the famous volcano eruption that consumed the Italian city.

“Those pieces really charge each other,” says Brown.



Johnnie Chatman’s “Self Portrait, John Ford Point,” 2018 pigment print.

Photo: Johnnie Chatman

The final room includes a series of self-portraits by Chatman alone in vast landscapes, including Prospect Park in Brooklyn, against the Vasquez Rocks in the Sierra Pelona Mountains and in Bathwater Basin in Death Valley.

The room also holds Christian Marclay’s 1995 video installation “Telephones,” which cuts together clips from media of people making phone calls. If the opening video piece felt very much of the present, “Telephones” has almost a quaint historic quality to it, not just because of the vintage media used in the piece, but also because of the focus on landline telephones.

“I felt very strongly those two video pieces were bookends in a way,” Brandt says.

While both works show subjects that are physically in solitude, they also demonstrate people reaching for some sort of contact.

“Everyone has felt alone in the last short while,” she says. “Hopefully, everyone has felt connected too.”

“I’m Not the Only One”: Sept. 8-Oct. 24. Free, by appointment only. 49 Geary St. #450, S.F. 415-981-2661. To make an appointment, email inquiries@fraenkelgallery.com.
fraenkelgallery.com



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