

Flora

Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

Flora, 2017

Synchronized double-sided film installation with shared sound,
30 minutes, loop.

Courtesy: the artists, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin

DIALOGUE TRANSCRIPT

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Flora (whispering):

Do you know that I'm supposed to have a Russian soul? I was told that I could have stepped out of *The Cherry Orchard*.

(David's side quote) Fate tosses you about from place to place.

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

(Flora's side quote) My love is like a stone tied round my neck: it's dragging me down to the bottom. But I love my stone. I can't live without it.

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

Flora:

I was headstrong, impulsive and romantic- and in many ways a bit of a savage. There are reasons for that. There must have been something wrong with me, because Alberto Giacometti wasn't interested in regular girls. One time when I sat for Alberto in his studio, when I was about to leave, I was standing looking at the head he was making of me. We were both silent. I was silent because he had given me the impression that he was not yet satisfied with his work, and that he wanted me to return and sit for him again. Of course, I would have done so, but he never said anything more about it. I heard that Alberto had also painted the head and carved into my face using his pocket knife.

One evening we went together to a party. There were a lot of people there and in particular there was one girl whom I thought was very attractive. I mentioned this to Alberto on the way home in a taxi, and he said, "There are a lot of girls like that, but only one Flora."

David:

No one has ever contacted me wanting to know about my mother, Flora, ever. My mother lived basically a very quiet and unnoticed life. It was a surprise out of the blue, it was totally unexpected. I can't express how much of a ... I was delighted to see that my mother would get some recognition. It was a ... she had a hard life.

Flora:

I had never known any one like Alberto and he had never known anyone like me. I told him that I wanted to make one beautiful thing, and he said, "me too!" Alberto recognized something in me, which I only very rarely recognized in myself.

David:

My name is David Mayo. I am the only surviving child of Flora Lewis Mayo. I am 81 years old. My mother mentioned when I was a young person that she had a friend by the name of Giacometti. I didn't relate to that at all, but she said that she knew him when she was in France, and that's about all I ever heard about Giacometti. She didn't really talk about her past. I never knew anything about Giacometti before my wife Googled the name Flora Mayo, at which time I discovered a book by James Lord. When I was thumbing through it for passages about my mother, what shocked me was the picture, a photo of my mother sitting next to Giacometti. I immediately recognized her and that just was an amazing moment, an amazing discovery, I just had never seen that before and that's how I came to learn about Giacometti's relationship with my mother.

David (reading):

"A photograph has survived of the two young artists and lovers seated on either side of Flora's portrait of Alberto. Flora looks at her lover wistfully, as she had cause to do. She is attractive but not beautiful, and there is something weak in her face. It must have been apparent even then, that she was one of those destined to be destroyed by circumstances."

Flora:

I knew early on that I was an artist... I seem to have been wound up for it. I understood exactly what my favorite poet, Emily Dickinson, meant when she wrote that, "the soul selects her own society, then shuts the door." I also felt the same way she did about snakes. My family was wealthy. They owned the AT Lewis and Sons Department Store in Denver Colorado. My mother was musical- she also painted and sewed beautifully. My father was an avid reader and its from him that I have my love for reading.

David:

My grandfather, Aaron Dennison Lewis, built a very large department store. It catered primarily to the wealthier people of Denver. They had the best of everything that money could buy. My mother went to the finest schools and enjoyed all the privileges that any young person could even think of.

Flora:

At the age of twelve, I remember hearing my mother in her room, crying at night, because my father was out with another woman. I began developing my own kind of "scandalous" behavior. Shortly before I was expelled from finishing school, one of my teachers warned me: "You're the kind of girl at whom the Devil looks up from Hell and says, 'I want you down here.'"

David:

The marriage between the two was an unhappy relationship. My impression is that it was arranged by my grandfather. He had taken an interest in this young man, Dudley Mayo, who had a position with him in his department store.

Flora:

For the great convenience of my father I foolishly and without conviction married at 19. Right before the wedding I had a dream- I could see myself standing on the side of the road, watching a funeral go by, and it was my own funeral! As was expected, soon afterwards, I had my first child- a daughter, Joan, my beautiful baby girl.

David:

The District Court, County of El Paso, December 17, 1924. It's the divorce decree of my mother and her husband Dudley Mayo and it is saying that the custody of Joan Mayo was awarded to the plaintiff, prior husband of Flora Mayo. Joan is my sister, my half sister.

Flora:

When I separated and then divorced, I felt no shame at all, because I had never loved my husband. It was agreed to pay me an allowance, if I would stay away from my family, as far away as possible. I left Denver and went to New York. I began attending sculpture classes at the Artist League. Escape. Escape is a wonderful word.

David:

My mother left for France when she was 25 years of age and wound up being there for eight years. She did not have Joan with her. Arrangements had been made to prevent my mother from ever seeing her daughter again. She understood the mistake that she had made. I never met my sister Joan. When I was looking her up a couple of years ago, I learned that she had passed away about seven years prior.

Flora:

I arrived in Paris on the sixteenth of April, 1925. I had high hopes of succeeding in my art. Antoine Bourdelle accepted me into his sculpture class at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Bourdelle highly praised my work to me and not long afterwards, I was encouraged, scolded and even pleaded with, to make the most of my talent and of myself. It was there, at the Academie, where I met Alberto Giacometti. I called him "Jack." He called me "the American."

David:

My grandparents supported my mother while she was in France, she actually lived comfortably, and then, my grandfather, who lost his business during the Depression, cut her off, and she came back to Denver, broke.

Flora:

One time, when I didn't show up at the Academie, Alberto came to see me. I was quite sick and in bed. He sat at the foot of the bed and looked at me with such compassion and love, we held each other as if we never wanted to let each other go. That was the beginning of our friendship.

David:

She never told me anything other than she could not afford to bring the works that she produced home, and I was never curious about what she did with them.

Flora:

I bought an early work of Alberto's in order to encourage him- a sculpture of a seated woman. Later, when I had to move out of my studio, I returned it to him. One summer

Alberto made a trip through Brittany where I was with my mother. It must have been there as Diego said, that I wanted Alberto to go swimming with me, but was equally happy in walking with him through those lovely grass-grown cliffs.

David:

I was born in 1935, February 28, 1935 in Denver, Colorado, and I have never known my father. I suspect that he may not have ever known about me. My mother decided to go to California when I was 2 years of age and it was hard with no father around, that was an experience that was very difficult for her. She was a turret lathe operator which was hard physical work in the defense industry making parts for the military during World War II. That was the start where I was taken care of by other families and my mother would visit on the weekends. Those are precious moments.

How did she talk about her life? I can remember she would frequently eat lunch by herself. And the reason is, she didn't have really anything in common with the other people who were working. She respected them, she got along with them, did she complain? No, but did she have a difficult time relating to people that weren't of her similar background? It was difficult for her, yeah. She had to do what she had to do and that was raise me.

Flora:

While it's true that Alberto and I never spoke of marriage between us, it's equally true that had he asked me, I would have very happily done so. Possibly, if I had waited long, patiently and perfectly enough in my little studio at rue Hippolyte Maindron, he would have done so.

David:

Did she have a broken heart? That's a good question. I never recall any, that she had any intimate, I mean even very friendly relationships with other men and she basically lived a solitary life.

In my teenage years, she was working as a janitor in a large office building. She cleaned toilets, she moped floors. It was very... it was the type of work that... it made her a nervous wreck and she was ultimately let go. I was in my first year at Loyola University and I'd saved all during the summer to attend there and after 2 weeks she lost her last and final job. I had to quit the university and basically support her. You just have to do what you have to do.

When I was 26 years of age, I was getting restless. I wanted to reach out and live my own life, and my mom, she and I were on edge with each other. We worked out an agreement that we would both separate and I would go my way and she would go her way. But what was the definition of her way? She wanted to return to Paris. She did not enjoy the experience when she was back there. Things had changed, people were gone. I think perhaps she was living a little bit of a fantasy and found out that it was unrewarding. And so, she came home from Paris the second time.

Flora:

Although I never told anyone, I was being threatened about my allowance- my family was investigating my life in Paris and they deeply disapproved. I never knew if and how much money would come or not and what was going to happen from one month to the other. I never spoke about this to Alberto. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I got drunk once in a

while, not often. But when I did drink, I had a horror of being alone. I sought companionship elsewhere. When Alberto found out he told me that something had broken between us. One day I found a letter stuck into my window. It was a long, very passionate love letter from Alberto, the most passionate letter, I have ever received. But by then it was too late for anything between us.

David:

The last apartment that she lived in was named Versailles in Los Angeles on South Saint Andrews Street near Wilshire Blvd. And at that time, she was receiving social welfare assistance, having a diet of canned foods, primarily. So, when the representative from the welfare department came to see how she was doing, she was insistent on not taking the additional supplement to provide her with three meals a day at a local coffee shop. And she was quite adamant about it, said she was doing fine.

Flora:

In early 1933 my father sent a telegram saying that he would send no more money to me. I was completely cut off, and I was utterly broke. At one point, I even had to beg for food. A charity organization, the Traveler's Aid Society, offered me a ticket back to America, steerage class, aboard the SS Stuttgart.

I destroyed all of my work.

David (reading):

"... and now she was a poor old woman to whom he could offer only the proof that his life had not been for nothing. They did not see each other again and Flora, before long, went back to California where she ended her days in demented solitude."

James Lord's description of my mother, I resent that. It's true that she was just getting by financially, but it's also very true that James Lord is totally ignoring her fortitude, that strength when she lost everything, and was doing her best to raise her son. I think that, considering the life that she had, from being up here to going down here and yet at the same time exerting all her effort in my development, as a single mom, to be, I am just very proud of her. That's what I would say to her.

Flora:

On March 10, 1933, in the pouring rain, I left Paris. There is still a piece of me there.

David:

This is my mom. My mother.

Flora:

I always had terrible trouble finishing anything. One night, Alberto came to my studio to help me fix the leaking roof. We looked at my unfinished pieces and I told him that I hated art. Alberto laughed and said that was a very good way to feel.