

Q + A WITH JEANNE JO

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?



Jeanne Jo is a Los Angeles-based artist and filmmaker who traverses the worlds of the visual and cinematic arts. In *What Am I Doing Here?*, she collaborates with friends and colleagues, all filmmakers, who cast her as the lead actor in short films that they then directed. The result, in which Jo draws on her background as a performance artist, is a stylistically plural study in displacement. Jo manifests through the visions of others and achieves a coherent self only via the accumulation of the characters she plays. The person who results is humorous, embodied, discomfiting, performed, and vulnerable. Her name is Jeanne Jo. What is she doing here?

The art world and Hollywood routinely feed off one another while also maintaining separate identities. As a traveler between these zones of cultural production, Jo contends with a split existence but also a more comprehensive sense of how fictive, narrative images shape selves today. When she is writing or directing a movie or show, she is making the popular culture on which we draw to tell the stories of our own lives. When she exhibits in a museum, she is instead a performance or video artist critiquing the conventions of that very culture's fixations on attention and experience. Or is it some other way around? What is Jeanne Jo doing here?

In the films that comprise this exhibition, a simultaneously real and fictitious Jo gets put through a gauntlet of challenges, the proverbial ringer, but she thrives despite the cruelties of a world blessed and obsessed with images. From absurd scenarios to demanding tasks, Jo proves up to every occasion. Nothing blunts her overriding affects and their scorn for the inanities of a culture saturated with reality television and internet memes. Jo's winsome pluck, shattered exasperation, and resolute grit register emphatically each time she flashes her knowing and unnerving smile, which disarms by concealing more than it reveals. What is Jeanne Jo doing here?



Q: By asking other people to make films in which you appear, this exhibition is both self-centered and other-oriented, juxtaposing elements of narcissism and altruism. What was it like creating a self-portrait with others? What did you learn about relationships of selves to others during this collaborative process?

JJ: Creating a self-portrait with the help of others means relinquishing control over one's image. It means learning about yourself by seeing yourself through the eyes of others. Sometimes, I became the stand-in for the director's body - for an emotion that they had experienced and wanted to share. Other times, I had a pressing experience that I asked the director to use as a prompt for the film. Or the director and I found our project through conversation when we connected over a shared experience. And occasionally, the director had had a scene in their head for some time and was just waiting for an opportunity to shoot it. It was a really interesting process, unique to each director. It was often playful and fun; it was sometimes stressful and dangerous.

Q: In your artwork, you often let yourself be a performing body, frequently one in extremis. That's very different from writing and directing, where you hang back in safety by set parameters in which others assume risks. What is it like to know both sides of this relationship as you do? Do you prefer one side of the camera to the other?

JJ: I think that whenever you are making work you should feel an element of fear, because you're making yourself vulnerable. A performer may be more vulnerable physically, but a filmmaker behind the camera is vulnerable emotionally. They are putting their vision into the world and asking their cast and crew to help them implement it.

I like both sides of the camera. They are very different experiences and I think of them as different tools in a toolbox.

Q: Your educational background is split between the visual arts on the one hand and film and television on the other. How does your work in the cinematic arts affect your work in the visual arts? And, vice versa, what does it mean to bring forms or motifs of cultural production from the visual arts into popular culture?

JJ: My background in performance art predates my film work. Being able to be in front of the camera has made me better when I'm behind it. I think that all directors should do a little performing, it helps us understand what we are asking of our actors.

And working in film has enriched my art practice. The technical skills and the collaborations with others have changed the visual language of my artwork. I'm still learning what that means and may mean for my work in the future.

Q: When we've talked about your work previously, you've mentioned that you're very interested in the metaphorical value of actions and the active value of metaphors. I see this as the crux of your work, and it's enormously generative. How do you go about construing this relationship between action and metaphor when you're working on a project?

JJ: I make a distinction between my goals with artmaking and filmmaking. When I make a film, I want the viewer to experience a very specific arc of emotions. I elucidate that arc carefully through the script and through casting, cinematography, and other directorial choices. But when I make a piece of art, I want it to point at a metaphor that has a multitude of meanings - meanings that can be specific to the individual who is viewing it. I'm generalizing, there is overlap between the two mediums, but that is my starting point when working on a project.

Q: In all your work, you clearly enjoy making people, yourself included, deeply uncomfortable about a whole lot of things: gender, violence, taboos, bodies. These are all things about which society holds conflicted ideas and around which it heightens emotions. What do you hope comes from achieving the state of unease that your work prompts so effectively?

JJ: I think that uneasiness can often prompt laughter. I like making people laugh and I think that laughter is the best way to talk about difficult issues.