

Special Guest Post:

Curator Emily Colucci's Idol Worship

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ART

William Noel Clarke



Idol Worship, curated by Emily Colucci, installation view.

Michelle Handelman, *Irma Vep, The Last Breath*, 2013, high-definition video installation, 36:00 min.

Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

Organized by guest curator Emily Colucci, the group exhibition *Idol Worship* at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn celebrates the ongoing cultural, social and political significance of role model adoration as an essential survival strategy. Self-identifying women, in particular, are often

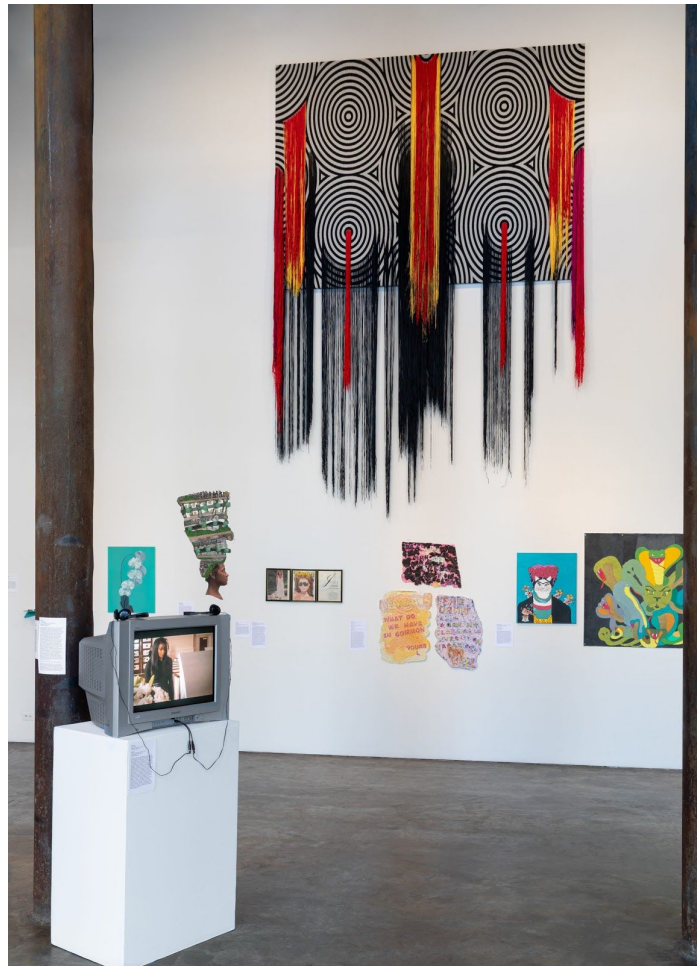
overlooked as figures to be emulated, exempt from the label of “genius” so readily bestowed upon men. Partially inspired by John Waters’s *Role Models*, a pseudo-autobiography through his influences or “filth elders,” the exhibition emphasizes work that presents women and women-identifying role models as sources of possibility, creativity, courage, self-fashioning and sometimes, transgression. While teens’ fanatical impulse to paper their bedroom walls with imagery of their favorite stars is seen as merely an adolescent phase, *Idol Worship* asserts how the identification with role models is especially significant for those alienated from dominant social institutions, whether the biological family, history, or mainstream culture.

Emily Colucci is a writer, curator and co-founder of *Filthy Dreams*, an award-winning blog analyzing art, culture and politics with a touch of camp. FRONTRUNNER presents a special guest post from Will Noel Clarke speaking to Colucci.

Looking back at this past decade, why do you think idols are a relevant topic? Have they always been?

I think idols are always a relevant topic, no matter when it is. But, if we’re talking about this past decade in particular, *Idol Worship* focuses on artists who are engaging with their women and women-identifying role models. This, to me, is especially important when living in particularly dire political times that have been defined by a certain kind of fragile masculinity. As I said in the press release, women and trans/gender non-conforming people are often exempt from the label of “genius” in comparison to men. You just have to look at the striking difference in the coverage of women and men political candidates to see the continued relevance of celebrating women and women-identifying people as role models. But it’s not only in politics. Lana Del Rey, who hovers above *Idol Worship* as our national anthem and blessed mother in the form of Pacifico Silano’s silkscreened flag *I am Fucking Crazy, But I am Free* is just now starting to get her much-deserved recognition as a great American songwriter after her stunning work throughout this decade. Her early career—even with, in my opinion, flawless albums like *Ultraviolence*—was defined by misogynistic takes by the bro-dominated field of music criticism.

But in general, I think role models are essential to who we are and how we navigate the world. I think this is especially valuable to people from marginalized communities who don't always see themselves represented in dominant culture or may not connect to their family of origin as people to emulate. Idols sustain us, give us courage, and in some ways, act as a blueprint of how we aspire to be.



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Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

And to answer your question if idols have always been important: I mean, people followed around Jesus, right? Certainly, the Internet has given us much more access to obsess over our chosen role models. Going down YouTube rabbit-holes can make fanaticism easier. But, I think it's something

that has always been a phenomenon whether or not people want to admit to it. Admitting to role model obsession can be exposing.

It can be exposing, as well as becoming an unhealthy obsession leading to levels of comparison culture. It's interesting how you polarise this issue and regard idolising/fandom as a form of resistance and identity, particularly through A list stars such as Lana Del Ray. Who else is idolised in the exhibition?

Certainly, I'm not going to stop anyone from unhealthy obsessions! Who wouldn't want to be anything but unhinged? But, *Idol Worship* features quite a range of idol figures. Like Lana, there are well-known personalities such as Madonna, Cardi B, Paula Abdul, Courtney Love, and Serena Williams, as well as some more underground subcultural heroes like Cookie Mueller, Holly Woodlawn and Ivy Nicholson. But there is also a thread running through the show celebrating activist figures. For example, Anna Campbell's sculpture *Battering Ram for Sylvia, for Marsha, for Stormé* honours the trans and gender non-conforming activists – Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson and Stormé DeLarverie – that were formative to the early Queer Liberation Movement, particularly with the Stonewall Uprising in 1969. Similarly, Helina Metaferia's collaged paper work *Headdress 5* juxtaposes an image of a contemporary Black woman wearing a headdress adorned with imagery culled from Black Panther newspapers, creating a lineage of Black activism. There are also some more unexpected idol figures like romance novelist Danielle Steel in Patty Gone's video *Dating Game* or transformative intergalactic cartoon diva Sailor Moon (who is juxtaposed with trans filth elder Amanda Lepore in Jason Elizondo's *Dancing With Myself*). Some more elusive idol figures also appear as seen in the anonymous erotic figures that populate Sophia Narrett's embroideries.

What interests me about the diversity of idols in the show is that viewers will have to hold these multiple heroes in their minds as similarly influential and powerful. You can idolize Paula Abdul, as well as the co-founders of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and find something sustaining within both of them.



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Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

So, you are exposing them as colloquially equivalent? You want to create (or sustain) a shared language around women idols regardless of their role in society/culture/politics?

I'm not sure equivalent is the right word necessarily. I'm not going to say Madonna, whose self-titled debut album was rerecorded on cassette by Emily Lombardo in her *My Madonna*, and Lee Zevy, a lesbian activist, therapist and co-founder of Identity House, who is honoured in Gwen Shockey's piece *Lee Zevy*, are necessarily equal in their influence on queer social change. But it's undeniable that they both had influence. It's complicated, and I like this complexity that emerges in the exhibition. It allows for viewers to approach the exhibition through different lenses, rather than offering a one-liner thesis. But I think we can celebrate a range of women and women-identifying people as idols (or as figures specific individuals or artists take as role models) without placing judgment on if they perform as the "right" kind of role model. I mean, problematic faves are my favorite.

While I think their role in society, culture and politics matters a lot, I am interested in creating a language around idol worshipping that is taken seriously rather than brushed off and relegated to some embarrassing teenage phase. As John Waters says, and I quote in my deranged fan letter introduction to the show, “Life is nothing if you’re not obsessed.”

Do you think obsession has become a curatorial methodology for the show or with your wider practice? Complicated, non-linear exhibition structures that are somewhat rhizomatic?

One hundred percent. Obsession is certainly a curatorial methodology for this show, as well as my wider curatorial and writing practice. Starting with *Idol Worship* specifically, I couldn’t curate a show based on role model adoration by simply sticking with some reserved conservative curating style. Imagine talking up obsession and then having a traditional white gallery wall hang. Yuck! Luckily, Smack Mellon’s space lends itself to non-traditional hangs and the team there was ready to take on some of my more insane ideas, like looping Kris Grey’s expansive *Blood Scroll* piece across the space or placing Liz Collins’s enormous piece *Inferno* near the top of their largest wall with other works hanging below.

This show, as well as the previous exhibitions I’ve curated such as *Party Out of Bounds: Nightlife As Activism Since 1980* at La MaMa Galleria and *Night Fever at Future Tenant*, come directly out of my writing, primarily on my site *Filthy Dreams*. From fandom to the world-making possibilities of nightlife to the legacy of disco, these are all topics that I’ve continually returned to and hacked away at in my writing. In some respects, the shows are ways for me to draw other people, both artists and visitors, into conversations about these topics that fascinate me (and yes, that I’m perhaps maniacally obsessed with).

Definitely! It’s almost as if you have styled it on a teenager’s bedroom...? Posters on the wall, multiple figures collapsing into one another, hanging above their bed like a shrine?

Yes!! That was certainly a conscious choice (and a much nicer way of describing it than a menacing stalker’s shrine). In fact, I had a conversation with one of the artists Tatyana Gubash who contributed a selection of twelve ink and glitter (and one rhinestone) drawings of the iconic and recognizable eye makeup of figures such as from Amy Winehouse, Nina Simone, Vampira,

Greer Lankton, and Candy Darling. Rather than hanging them framed, side-by-side or in a boring old grid, which more than being just snooze-worthy, seemed antithetical to the point and desired impact of the show, we organized them, unframed, in a more amorphous, asymmetrical grouping to specifically create that teenage bedroom effect.

Who is your idol and do you want to be idolised?

I have so many idols it's impossible for me to choose just one! Some of the absolute top though have to be Nick Cave (I logged 168 hours of The Bad Seeds this year according to Spotify), Lana Del Rey (a close second in monomaniacal listening), Azealia Banks (I take obsessive screenshots of her Instagram stories for an unknown reason and with an unknown goal, some of which I put in a recent article on Filthy Dreams), John Waters, Divine, David Lynch, Lydia Lunch, Grimes, Elvis...I could go on.

And would I want to be idolized?
Are you saying I'm NOT?! I'd specifically like to be what John Waters has named—and a term I use an awful lot—"a filth elder." Just like John, I'd like to lead by tarnished, depraved example.



Jason Elizondo, *Dancing With Myself* (2018), video montage projected on PLA filament, 3 min 6 sec, 20" x 17" x 17". Image courtesy of Smack Mellon.
Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

To finish, and because you have mentioned it throughout our conversation, what is a filth elder?

Ha! It's funny—in working on the written materials for the show, Smack Mellon asked me the same question. You mean it's not in the dictionary?! Maybe there needs to be a published lexicon of trash. Filth elder is a term that our preeminent filth elder, filmmaker and Pope of Trash John Waters created. I'm not sure when the first time he used it was exactly, but he often uses it to describe himself such as in his recently published book *Mr. Know-It-All: The Tarnished Wisdom of a Filth Elder*. He also defines other idol figures as filth elders that he lays out in his book *Role Models*, which was a big inspiration for *Idol Worship*. If we take John as the prime example of a filth elder, the definition tends to reveal itself: someone who has dedicated themselves to campy subversion and anarchy who can act as a shining beacon for the rest of us to act bad.

In truth, I prefer the term to idol or role models because it necessarily implies transgression, as well as a genealogy or lineage. However, for the show, the gleeful sacrilegious aspect of the title *Idol Worship*, especially with the show being around the holidays, was an opportunity that was too good to pass up.

Idol Worship, curated by Emily Colucci, was staged at Smack Mellon in DUMBO, Brooklyn from 16 November to 29 December, 2019.

Participating artists: Rebecca Baldwin, Loren Britton, Anna Campbell, Liz Collins, Alexandria Deters, Jamison Edgar, Jason Elizondo, Cara Erskine, Caroline Garcia, Patty Gone, Kris Grey, Tatyana Gubash, Michelle Handelman, Tenaya Izu, Aaron Krach, Phoenix Lindsey-Hall, Emily Lombardo, Helina Metaferia, Sophia Narrett, Jennifer Quinones, Brice Peterson, Gwen Shockey, Pacifico Silano, Anna Skarbek, Tiffany Smith, Ariella Tai, and Conrad Ventur.

William Noel Clarke

William Noel Clarke is an independent curator living in London. He received a First with his BA (Hons) in Fine Art at Leeds Beckett University, UK, and his MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. His research interests are in alternative, natural and artificial networks and ecologies as well as the representation of the nonhuman in gallery contexts. He is interested in artists and theorists who work collaboratively and cross-disciplinarily at the intersection of art, science and technology to create a larger co-inquiry for activism and research. Follow him on Instagram at @williamnoelclarke