

Muse and medium

What Helen Mirra calls her “complicated relationship to authorship” began in her childhood, when as the sole member of the “Steamer Club” she awoke many mornings to discover the latest chapter of a serial adventure story slipped under her bedroom door. “The Adventures of Helen and the Monster Baby” and other tales, tapped out on a manual typewriter by Mirra’s father, were illustrated with pop-culture images, such as the roughly cut-out monkey from *The Planet of the Apes* pasted onto chapter five of “Monster Baby.” The stories’ protagonist, who happened also to be named Helen, was a brave little girl who saved frightened babies and helpless animals from harm.

“In reading the material as an adult I understood that my father was the person who behaved the way I did in the stories, and I was really the monster baby,” the senior lecturer in the Committees on the Visual Arts and Cinema and Media Studies commented at a retrospective screening of her video collages and films. This transference between her father and herself, she explained, showed her that

authorship can be fluid. And film and video, she discovered, offered a rich context in which to explore the complicated relationship between identity and authorship.

With *I, Bear* (1994), made while working on an M.F.A. at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she returned to those childhood adventure stories, cutting and pasting together a script from the tales, which she had recorded her father reading aloud. That became a soundtrack for the video, constructed from vintage footage of herself as a child having a conversation with her stuffed bear, intercut by a nature film of a real bear. Spliced into her father’s halting reading—“Who are you?” asked Helen. “I am Helen. I am Helen”—are the sounds of birdsong, growls, and a tumbling stream.

Since completing her degree in 1996 the 32-year-old Mirra has consistently caught attention. In 2002 she participated in seven group shows (from San Francisco to Vienna), had three solo exhibitions (including one at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art), and received a fellowship to work in artists’ studios at Bleckede Castle in Lower Saxony.

Along the way she has built a reputation as a “post-cinema artist,” Yuri Tsivian, professor of art history and cinema and media studies, explained at the event. In other words, for Mirra film is both muse and medium. In *Becket* (1996) it’s muse: she made a “silent silent film” by cutting 16-mm-wide blue cotton banding into rectangular “frames” and sewing them back together to resemble a strip of film, unrolled and installed as a horizontal line on a gallery wall. In the 1996 *Schlafbau* (Sleep) film resumes its place as medium: a black-and-white aerial shot of water takes up the top three-quarters of the screen, while beneath it run

scenes from the bottom quarter of six foreign films—necks, feet, knees, and other borders—complete with subtitles.

Cutting and splicing—the labor of both filmmaking and collage (and sewing, for that matter)—are, Mirra explained, what make her art meaningful to her. Her notions of labor and travel also underlie the water images that appear and reappear in her film. Living in San Francisco in the early 1990s, she began thinking about the life of the sailor, who went to sea not for the romantic “pull of the water,” she said, but out of necessity: the “push of the land” to find work.

The “confluence of labor and the restfulness of water” became the subject of *Third*

as a sort of map. In *A Map of 81°N, at a Scale of One Degree to One Foot*, for example, she hand-watercolored a blank 360-foot-long strip of 16-mm film with dark blue, light blue, white, and brown in a direct, foot-per-degree correspondence with the presence of water, ice, snow, and land along that tundra latitude. When screened, the film evokes the same flying sensation that the shots of water in *Schlafbau* and *Third* do, the scenery rushing by below but essentially remaining unchanged. Yet, for the viewer, *81°N* also has a facility that in feature films would be considered flawed, with flakes of watercolor and strands of lint catching for brief moments before disintegrating under the force of the



In Helen Mirra's 1998 *Untitled Song (heh)*, constructed from childhood home films, authorship is up for grabs.

(1998). In that video Mirra takes 30 seconds of the 1934 French film *L'Atalante* and repeats the same few scenes over and over for 45 minutes. While the original film concerns a pair of newlyweds floating downriver on a barge, Mirra's version focuses on brief appearances by the cabin boy, a character so secondary as to be “tertiary” (hence the film's title).

The nature of film as a series of sections has led Mirra to contemplate the medium

spinning reel and heat of the projector light.

Indeed, the appearance and disappearance of the flakes and lint as the painted scenery goes by form *81°N*'s only plot—an odd outcome that is not lost on Mirra. “I’m interested in plot only as a bystander,” she commented, rather than as the driving force of her films. By pulling from other sources for many of her works, her role as author is to be a bystander too.—S.A.S.