

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Beyond the Script: Artist Amie Siegel Retraces Jean-Luc Godard's 'Le Mépris'



Amie Siegel, *Genealogies* (detail), 2016, HD video. Courtesy: the artist, Simon Preston Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London; photograph: Luke A. Walker

'Can you see my behind in the mirror?' Camille asks her husband in the opening scene of *Le Mépris* (Contempt, 1963), Jean-Luc Godard's revision of *The Odyssey* as a 20th-century tale of luxury and marital malaise. Camille is lying naked in bed, listing her body parts for his approval. Soon their relationship will unravel against a backdrop of modern Italian architecture and the Tyrrhenian Sea, and she will leave him for another man. This Penelope will not wait, nor is she faithful. By the time the final credits roll, she will also be dead.

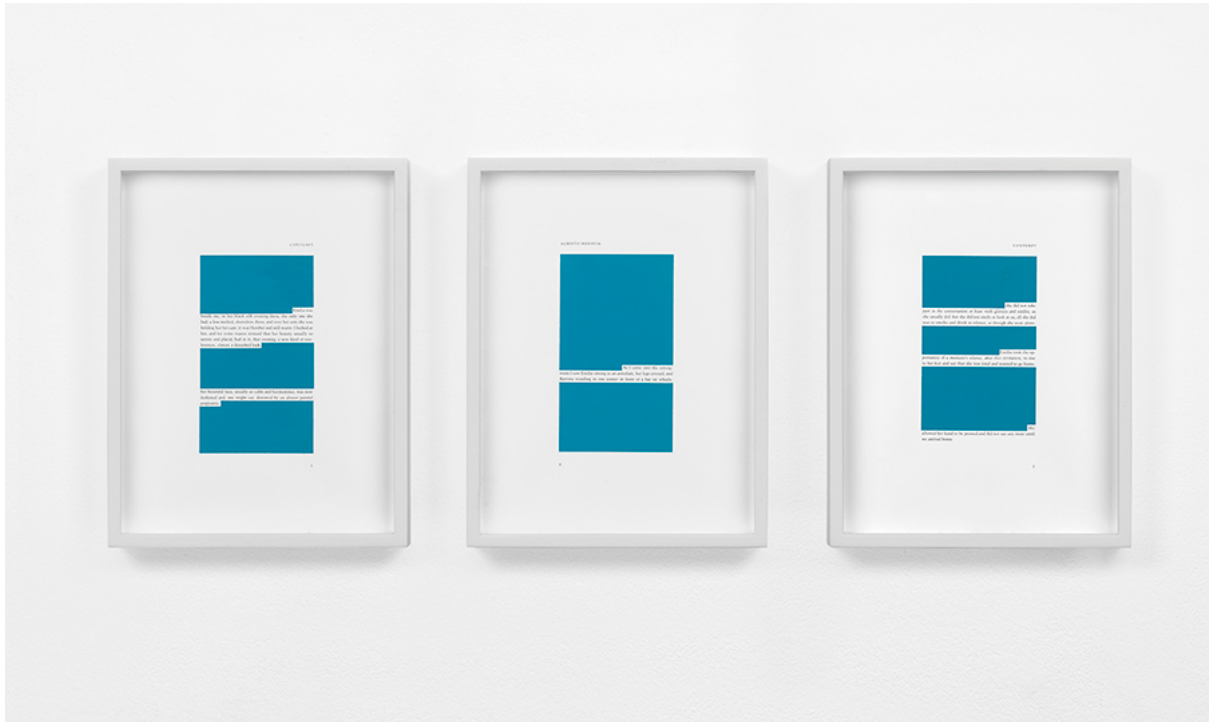
Reflections of Camille are everywhere in 'Amie Siegel: Backstory' at Thomas Dane Gallery, an exhibition that traces the precursors and duplicates of *Le Mépris* in pop culture, the arts and psychoanalysis. At the centre of the show is *Genealogies* (2016), a documentary-style video that takes viewers on a contextual deep-dive, elucidating her status as an object of *amour fou*. Narrating over archival footage, Siegel explains that *Le Mépris* is based upon Alberto Moravia's novel *Il disprezzo* (A Ghost at Noon, 1954). Moravia's love interest, Emilia, a precursor to the beautiful and tragic Camille, was, in turn, influenced by Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva* (1902), a novella about an archaeologist who becomes obsessed with a Roman bas-relief of a woman. If this chain of erotic phantasms is beginning to sound

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Freudian, that's because it is: Jensen's use of archaeology as an analogy for buried desire, Siegel says, inspired Sigmund Freud's essay 'Delusion and Dream in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (1907).



Amie Siegel, *Body Scripts* (pp. 5-7), 2015, gouache on paper, each 28 × 20 cm. Courtesy: the artist, Simon Preston Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London; photograph: Todd White

Genealogies moves at pace. I could get the bends trying to keep up, I think, as Siegel rises from the depths of psychoanalytic costume drama and emerges at an advert for Hugo Boss. In 2011, the fashion house reproduced a scene of Camille sunbathing on a terrace overlooking the sea at Capri, shortly before she tells her husband she no longer loves him. In *Le Mépris*, a detective novel is spread across her buttocks. Hugo Boss replace the book with a handbag, the symbolism attached to the female body shifting from crime scene to luxury vessel. By the time *Genealogies* ends, my head is spinning and a disquieting, morbid fantasy has emerged, in which women feature as collectible ruins.

Two additional works on show further indicate Camille's perverse unreality. The walls of the gallery's first room are lined with *Body Scripts* (2015), a series of framed pages from *Il disprezzo*. Siegel has selected passages in which the female protagonist is described by her husband, obscuring the remaining text with blocks of aquamarine paint – 'the average colour' of the Tyrrhenian Sea, as she puts it. 'I leant forward and took hold of her almost violently by the hair and tried to bend her head back to kiss her,' reads a line on page 32. In the gaps between the blue-green, a woman takes shape, her contours defined by her lover's lust, aggression and insecurity.

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Amie Siegel, *The Noon Complex*, 2016, three-channel HD video installation. Courtesy: the artist, Simon Preston Gallery, New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London; photograph: Luke A. Walker

In the final room is the video installation *The Noon Complex* (2016). Projected onto the walls are scenes from *Le Mépris* from which Camille has been digitally removed. A flatscreen monitor on the floor plays a video of an actress in a gallery, replicating the movements of Godard's missing female lead. As the camera lingers over an empty sofa and a sun-drenched terrace, the surrogate sits upon a plinth and stretches out upon an empty floor. In *The Noon Complex*, Siegel locates Camille somewhere between her absence and reproduction. 'Yes,' her husband replies, when she asks if he can see her body in the mirror at the beginning of the film. Well he might, for Camille is pure reflection.

<https://www.frieze.com/article/beyond-script-artist-amie-siegel-retraces-jean-luc-godards-le-mepris>