



Gloria, 2004. Image courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch, New York

Oliver Herring **Common Threads**

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Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

Oliver Herring

Common Threads

For as long as he has been creating art, Oliver Herring (b. Germany 1964) has been making connections between sight and touch as well as with the audience, art history, and visual culture in conventional and unconventional ways. On close examination we find common threads throughout his highly sophisticated and varied oeuvre that validate us as integral not only to the reception of Herring's work but also to its meaning. **Oliver Herring: Common Threads** brings together works in diverse mediums that are wryly seductive. We are drawn in by the artist's methods and their relationships to time—past and present, linear and nonlinear—and space, which for Herring can be an ambiguous and contentious dance between three dimensions and two.

Upon entering the **Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery** we encounter **Gloria** (2004, cover), a life-size photo sculpture. We are startled by its stunning realism and eerily alien, scale-like texture. Despite the size, proportion, and verisimilitude, it is quintessentially an artificial human being, a three-dimensional collage of digital C-prints, fragments made of the living Gloria. This brings to mind the fabricated people in Ridley Scott's science-fiction thriller **Blade Runner** (1982). In the film a former Los Angeles policeman named Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is brought out of retirement to hunt down and "retire" or terminate four artificially created humans called replicants, who came illegally from another colony in space to Los Angeles in 2019. As the story unfolds we learn that replicants or, in slang, "skin jobs" have a disquieting relationship to the medium of photography. They are clones of a flesh-and-blood variety,

but they are programmed with memories based on a succession of photographs designed to formulate a personal history. They become human as photographic references are put together for them to create a coherent whole. Herring describes his photo sculptures as composites of time and materials. Standing before the recorded history of Gloria's presence and absence, we note that she exists for us now only as photographic memory. The artist's labor-intensive process fuses the goals of vision with touch to test the mind's eye.

The earliest work in the exhibition, **Queen-Size Bed with Coat** (1993–94, fig. 1), a hand-knitted sculpture that sits directly on the floor, was created as an homage to Ethyl Eichelberger, the performance artist and drag queen who, as the result of being diagnosed with AIDS, committed suicide in the face of what was then believed to be a certain and gruesome death. In the 1990s Herring was a graduate student at Hunter College in New York City. Knitting was a departure, for at the time he was studying painting. The repetitive motion of knitting marks time. By making row after row of Mylar connections the artist affirms his physical presence, thereby denying absence, denying the ultimate absence of death. Herring uses silver Mylar to refer to armature and its implied weight; however, the seductive materiality suggests something lighter, more animated.

Figure 1. **Queen-Size Bed with Coat**, 1993–94. Image courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch, New York



The vibrating surface of **Queen-Size Bed with Coat** absorbs and reflects light to form an anxious beauty poised between this world and the next. The human form suggested by an empty coat rises and dissolves into a monochromatic cloud that is at once concrete and ethereal. Writing **In Memory of W. B. Yeats**, W. H. Auden begins, "He disappeared in the dead of winter." Auden laments the death of a powerful voice and acknowledges that poetry, even by Yeats, changes nothing. In death the artist, once present, is immediately absent. Similarly, Eichelberger's famed defiance disintegrates like a sugar cube in a hot liquid. For Herring the thousands of reflective knitted silver loops were meant to throw light on the viewer, to beckon engagement, even activism, that would refute the disappearance of Eichelberger.

Herring's performance work dates back to his 1993 appearance at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, where his Mylar works were being exhibited. He sat knitting as museum goers watched. After knitting for more than ten years, Herring began working out conceptual problems in new ways. His foray into video was a logical



Figure 2. **S Swings J (painted/large)**, 2003. Image courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch, New York

next step, for embedded in the process of knitting is a continuous line or thread. Knitting's consecutive action recalls the time-motion studies of late-nineteenth-century photographers Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, whose work—influential at the time of its creation—more recently inspired seriality in the work of Sol LeWitt, Philip Glass, and Chuck Close among others. Similarly, Herring's earliest videos from 1999 employ stop-motion sequences that privilege the raw immediacy of home movies over slick studio productions, a parallel also implicit in the contrast between hand-knitted and refined, manufactured garments.

By the early twenty-first century the intense interiority and personal specificity of Herring's work gives way to levity and to increased audience participation. The artist seems to be having fun himself, and thus we are given permission to join him. Marcel Duchamp and Bruce Nauman set the stage for ironic humor. Herring, however, avoids irony in favor of farce of the Charlie Chaplin-Buster Keaton variety, and we are inside rather than outside of his jokes. In the video work Herring turns the camera on himself, but more often on untrained performers who have responded to an open call. He extracts engaging performances that refer obliquely to the "actions" of Joseph Beuys, whose concerts blending literature, music, visual art, performance, and everyday life opened art to a wider role in public life.

Herring began his art career as a painter. He was enrolled in a graduate program renowned for teaching color theory when he turned to transparent tape and then Mylar, in part, to break away from tradition in search of

spontaneity. What he discovered was the exhilaration of taking risks, which he continues to do. He was out on a limb. In **S Swings J (painted/large)** (2003, fig. 2), Herring's camera freezes the image of a romantic **pas de deux**. Two figures are surrounded by vines and we wonder if they, like Apollo and Daphne, are declaring new boundaries between plant and animal or art and life, for they are undeterred by gravity or convention. When the photograph was made, Herring was standing on a tall ladder aiming the camera down at the two participants who were positioned, rather uncomfortably, on the ground. The vines and flowers were later drawn with black marker directly onto the photograph. Letting us in on his secret on how the image was made, Herring reminds us that things are not always what they seem and that something ordinary can be magical when seen from another perspective.

Herring takes participatory engagement to another level with TASK events, parties, and workshops—loosely organized gatherings where participants write and randomly select a task to be performed. During a TASK workshop with a group of teenagers in 2007, one of the teens wrote a task to "make a knife and kill someone." The teens would stage a death, "retire" an unreal person, calling to mind again the task assigned to Harrison Ford's character in **Blade Runner**. Herring, in turn, made portraits of the teen participants. Next, he obfuscated the portraits, building the flat

surface into relief using bits of museum board and metallic photo paper. One of these teen portraits is the most recent work in **Common Threads**. With **Stanzi / Silver and Iridescent (vertical)** (2008, fig. 3), we are brought back to the trance of contradictions between creation and destruction, presence and absence so poignantly expressed earlier in the homage to Ethyl Eichelberger. In the portrait the parts do not add up to a recognizable whole as in **Gloria**. Conversely, the luminous beauty of the surface of **Stanzi** dissolves into abstraction, anonymity, annihilation.



Figure 3. **Stanzi / Silver and Iridescent (vertical)**, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch, New York

Oliver Herring: Common Threads demonstrates that in a body of work that stretches the definitions of sculpture, photography, video art, and performance, there is a link between the artist's inner world and ours. As we encounter shimmering surfaces of absorbed and reflected light, struggles between volume and flatness, and the anxious tension between the subject and subjectivity, we find unspoken connections to the fragile threads of our common destiny.

Susan H. Edwards, Ph.D.

Oliver Herring Common Threads

Checklist of the Exhibition

Gloria, 2004

Digital C-prints, museum board, foam core, polystyrene, and vitrine; 72 x 40 x 40 in.
Collection Max Protetch, New York

Queen-Size Bed with Coat, 1993–94

Knitted silver Mylar, 12 x 57 x 88 in.
Collection of Peter Norton

S Swings J (painted/large), 2003

C-print and permanent marker, 30 x 40 in.
Collection of Eric Berns and Edward Jeffreys,
Golden Valley, Minnesota

Stanzi / Silver and Iridescent (vertical), 2008

Digital C-print with metallic photo paper applied three dimensionally on museum board, 57 1/2 x 41 x 3 1/8 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York



Installation view from *Oliver Herring: Me Us Them*. Courtesy of the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. Photograph by Arthur Evans

Videos:

Dance 1, 2002 (2:48)

Spit Reverse, 2002 (2:22)

Trucks, 2004 (4:17)

Howard Street (airborne), 2007 (4:12)

Waterloo Street, 2007 (4:20)

Make-Believe in Regent Park, 2009
(5:32)

Courtesy of the artist and
Max Protetch Gallery, New York

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