



# JANET KURNATOWSKI

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## **Emma Bee Bernstein: *An Imagined Space***

Curated by Phong Bui & Linnea Kniaz

**March 25 - April 23, 2011**

Reception: Friday, March 25th, 7-9pm

Hours: Friday & Saturday 1-7 pm, Sunday 12 - 6 pm,  
or by appointment

"Self-portrait with change machine," archival digital C print, 17" x 22", 2006



Janet Kurnatowski Gallery presents *Emma Bee Bernstein: An Imagined Space*, an exhibition of photographs curated by Phong Bui and Linnea Kniaz, from March 25 through April 23, 2011. A reception will take place on Friday, March 25, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.

"Using a historical imagination filtered through our contemporary visual culture," Emma Bee Bernstein says, "I paste together fragments of feminine representation into newly envisioned configurations." Bernstein's first solo show with the gallery, *An Imagined Space*, displays 24 of these original configurations, created by the artist between 2005 and 2007.

Bernstein, who was just 23 when she died in 2008, often documented young women engrossed in games of dress-up and posing. Her photographs reflect critically on the historical, political, and social representations of femininity and are replete with allusions to historical paintings and photographs. For Bernstein, the display of femininity is inexorably linked to artifice and fashion. At the same time, her poignant pictures pierce the veil of their own tableaux, revealing powerful affective currents. *An Imagined Space* reveals, revels even, in the imaginary spaces of a photographic theater.

Based on Bernstein's searching exploration of fashion, feminism, portraiture, film, and documentary, the 24 images displayed in this exhibition depict young women cloaked by makeup, costume, props, and imagined identity. These arresting tableaux are performed in interior and exterior spaces that uncannily mirror the psychic spaces of Bernstein's subjects. In these iconic moments, her female subjects become one with their costumes and environments, whether bleak, unkempt, or domestic. Nevertheless, the photographs demand that viewers question the authenticity of their intimacy. Bernstein's young women, including many of her own self-portraits, with their potent poses and alluring stares, so often directed towards the camera, allude to, while veering from, contemporary fashion campaigns, with their awareness of the camera and photographer's presence. Bernstein's viewers are called upon to ponder the masquerade, the subjects' reticence in the presence of a camera, and the photographer's ability to construct the reality of her subjects. The subjects' varying proximity to the camera, their meek gestures and vacant expressions, further suggest camouflage, anonymity, and identity confusion.

In addition to the female performance, Bernstein employs intricate formal elements in the surrounding space in order to further investigate the pretense inherent within photography and specifically representations of femininity. Sparse, carefully selected detail continually directs the viewer's gaze. Pattern, color, and the subjects' positioning within the space (leaning against a wall, crouched close to the floor, lodged into a corner, splayed across the ground) formally—and emphatically—unite the subjects and their space. Uneasy colors such as morose yellows, synthetic blues, musty pinks, and turbulent greens, while strikingly absurd and humorous, imply theatrics, artificiality, and the artist's role in composing the tableau. The lighting also hinders visibility and augments ambiguity: glaring light floods over detail, while dim lighting challenges any observation.

As to the mystery surrounding and absorbing the female subjects, Bernstein says, "The perfect projection of the internal imagined self, if it exists, only does so for the duration of the photographic performance." Though all facets, including the subjects' internal self, manifest imagination and extract uncertainty, the vivid images arise from a moment of "photographic performance," in which a multitude of chosen formal and conceptual elements miraculously synthesize. Ultimately, it is with artistic clarity—astute perception, keen awareness, and fervent direction—that Bernstein creates an imagined space so refined, yet so vast.

Emma Bee Bernstein graduated in 2007 from the University of Chicago with a BA with honors in Visual Arts and Art History. She died in December 2008 at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, where she was on an internship. Her first solo show, *Emma Bee Bernstein (1985–2008), Masquerade: A Retrospective*, was held in 2010 at the University of Chicago. Her photographs have also been shown at A.I.R. Gallery in New York, the Smart Museum in Chicago, and at the University of Nevada at Reno. In *Emma's Dilemma*, a film directed by Henry Hills, Bernstein interviewed artists from the downtown New York City art scene from 1997 to 2002. *Belladonna #4*, which features her writing and photographs, was published in 2009. *GirlDrive: Criss-Crossing America, Mapping Feminism* by Bernstein and Nona Willis Aronowitz was published by Seal Press in October 2009.

About the curators: Phong Bui is a curator, critic, artist, and the publisher of *The Brooklyn Rail*. Linnea Kniaz has a B.A. in Studio Art and Art History from Skidmore College. She is a painter and curator, and works at *The Brooklyn Rail*.

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