



# DESPITE OUR GODS

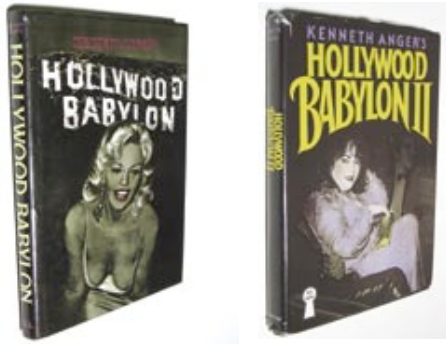
## KARLA MILOSEVICH'S SACRAMENTAL EYE

BY KEVIN KILLIAN



If fame is form, there might be a whole repertoire of “fame gestures,” like the stylized signals of Kabuki, by which the famous person might express his or her fame—sunglasses slipping into a darkened limo; the Oscar gleaming in the champagne bucket, the twin bodyguards of Ashley and Mary Kate Olsen. What confounds and disturbs us is when someone becomes famous without recourse to the popular vote—it just seems so anti democratic, perhaps. Take Gwyneth Paltrow—famous, but has there ever been one person on earth who actually likes her? I don’t think so. Karla Milosevich’s video work parlays these contradictions and exasperations into a canny, provocative theater of image. Image and gesture both. As every gambler realizes, “You gotta know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em.” Among living filmmakers whose work is

Video still from *Blue Lady*, 1988.



particularly resonant with Karla's, I think of Kenneth Anger, who created this perfect corpus of work along two lines, the shamanic films of the *Magick Lantern Cycle*, and the frankly star-struck and salacious *Hollywood Babylon* books. Milosevich's work in video follows these same general lines but crosses them, blurs them, fucks them up until they attain a new alterity and a very different embouchement.

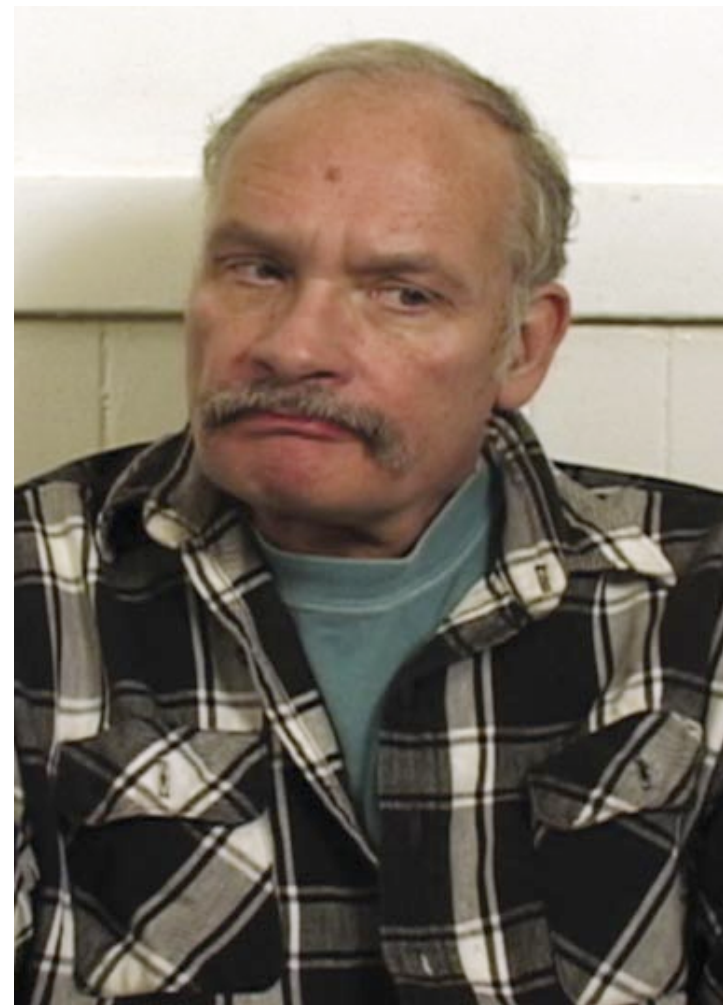
Karla Milosevich was born in Crowell, Texas, in 1965, the daughter of realist painter Paul Milosevich. She came to live in San Francisco in 1987, and in 1995 she took a BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied with Tony Labat, George Kuchar, Nayland Blake, Crane + Winet, among others, and where she met the German-born video artist Kota Ezawa; they married in 1997 and have a young daughter, Zora. At SFAI she also met the painter Cliff Hengst, who was working at the school bookstore. He became one of her favorite artists, along with Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, and Vito Acconci. With Ezawa and Craig Goodman, Karla formed the Helen Lundy Trio, an "art" band whose one CD came out in 1999; we've heard scattered tracks from them since, but nothing as monumental as that first CD.

*Blue Lady*, the earliest videotape I have seen of hers, is brief, lyrical. Down a broken sidewalk staggers a young woman wearing a vintage blue dress, long gloves, and a pair of wicked strappy sandals, who Milosevich describes as a "broken-hearted woman who has been hurt and is running away from love." The camera follows as she stumbles and sways, apparently drunk but possibly demented, in San Francisco of yesteryear. Blue Lady's sixties wig and absurd cocktail dress indicate a period setting, as does the background music, a sublimely moronic take on Bacharach & David's "I'll Never Fall In Love Again." Abruptly the body we see collapses to the ground, and the camera, panting in relief, surveys the curious Gulliver-like length of her,

from the crown of her head across the width of her hips to those atrocious sandals. The music, blithe, continues. Is the urban experience always to be one of downfall? You know what Frank O'Hara wrote in his 1964 poem "Lana Turner Has Collapsed":

*there is no snow in Hollywood  
there is no rain in California  
I have been to lots of parties  
and acted perfectly disgraceful  
but I never actually collapsed  
oh Lana Turner we love you get up*

"*Blue Lady* was autobiographical," revealed Milosevich in a recent exchange, "but playing the role in a wig and special outfit was a way of removing my self from the performance that allowed me to let loose in the character." Like Cindy Sherman? "Kevin, you're so clever. I haven't thought about it in a long time, but I surely was inspired by the work of Cindy Sherman. "When I lived with roommates Craig Goodman, John Koch, Robert Vedar, and Brent Coffin at 3214 Mission Street, we used to do a lot of photo shoots. John, Craig, and Robert liked to get dressed in drag. We would dress ourselves up, then photograph each other to record it. Craig had studied photography and had a lot of cameras and lights. We did a photo series together called *Misty Summers*. In these photos, I played a small-town country singer that moved to the city to try and make it big. The way we photographed it to tell a story was an homage to Cindy Sherman's film stills. This eventually led to video. The first video I ever made in 1992 was also called *Misty Summers*, a version of the same story that we had started with the photo essay. It's all distorted now because it was edited on VHS and over time its quality has totally degraded." A sort of follow-up, *Getting Centered* spoofs late-night infomercials with a script that could have been pulled from today's Scientology headlines; the actors improvise along specific lines, and the sound is later added in postproduction, so that the speaking voices are noticeably faster or slower than the mouths of the actors. Louder, too—though the actors are speaking from a Mission Street rooftop they might be cooing right in your ear. Milosevich sees this as a happy accident. On such accidents a style is born. *Getting Centered*'s cast of grifters is amusing, almost sincere. After a minute



of shock you realize they're pulling this whole line of gibberish out of some deep place of need. Carla Gaytan demonstrates the "crazy legs" approach to self-realization with the mad energy of Joan Crawford's *Charleston in Our Dancing Daughters* (1928). The tape is a happy release from the claustrophobia of *Blue Lady* and a poem in praise of the open air and the horizonless California sky.

In *Star Exercise*, Milosevich films herself in tight closeup, a cruel box in which her head seems to bump against all sides of the screen. She plays a celebrity of some sort and mouths disconnected beauty and health mantras, garnered from an interview in *Star* magazine, the guilty pleasure supermarket tabloid. "I worry about cellulite more than anything else." "I just hate to walk into a party and you look around and



This page: Kota Ezawa and Karla Milosevich, video stills from *IP*, 2000.

Video still of George Kuchar (reading the will of Donald Judd) in *Love Can Build a Bridge*, a play written with Kevin Killian, Poets' Theater, San Francisco, 2003.



Video still from *Star Exercise*, 2003.

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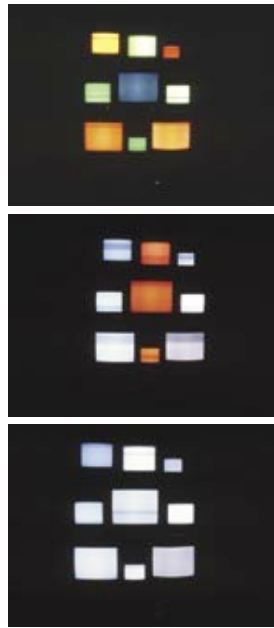
see all these women and there's not one real thing about them, and I ask myself, "Why? Why?" She describes the many types of sports she enjoys—"I work out like a demon is what people say"—among them snowboarding, field hockey, basketball. Milosevich repeats some of these lines, in a bizarre echo of the 1975 thriller *The Stepford Wives*, in which sexy yet demure robots are programmed with the inanities of the "perfect woman" their programming husbands desire. You can't tell them from the real thing until the speaking mechanism jams and they keep repeating and repeating. The tape feels cut up, reassembled, a jigsaw of feeling about body issues that video mostly avoids. Is it telling that in a tape all about the body, the camera stops at the neck and never shows an inch further south? "Who wrote your dialogue?" I asked her. "It's all from Jamie Lee Curtis," she replied.

In 1996 Milosevich began working with the San Francisco Poets' Theater, a loosely knit group of painters, poets, photographers, critics, and filmmakers who get together to produce original stage works every couple of months, often with large casts, elaborate costumes, and raucous musical numbers. After playing a kindly psychiatrist in my play *Wet Paint* (1996), Karla found herself creating many roles in this ensemble. She played the performance artist Ann Magnuson in *Total Eclipse* (2004), a game show contestant in *The Vegetable Kingdom* (1999), Mrs. Joseph Beuys in *Capriccio* (1999), a young mime student in *Fascination* (2002),

Swiss starlet Ursula Andress in *The Big Keep* (2003), and archetypal punk rocker Patti Smith in *The Smith Family* (2003). Inspired by the controlled energy of this theater, she decided to create her own theater piece, and together she and I wrote *Love Can Build a Bridge* (2003), a play that paid ironic homage to her Texas roots. I'd get rather fanciful, and Karla would always insist on grounding the script in the actual, the tangible, the real-life sights and sounds of Marfa, Texas, its mystery lights, its redneck lowriders, its country melancholy. And when we were stumped I could always ask her to think back and remember objects she'd encountered as a child. Like tumbleweeds the responses spilled out: "Tornadoes, thunderstorms, dirt and dust



Jennifer Locke with Craig Goodman and Craig Goodman with Anne McGuire in a video still from *White Rainbow*, 2005.



This page left to right:  
Video still from *Kaleidoscope*, 2004  
and view of the video installation  
*Rocktoberfest at Scene/Escena* in  
San Francisco, a collaboration  
with Kota Ezawa, 1998.

Opposite page:  
John Koch from the *Flower* series, 1994.

storms, wheat and cotton fields, flat plains, warm winds." Trees? "Pecan, weeping willows, plum, peach, apricot, mimosa, pomegranate." How about food? "Okra, cantaloupe, pinto beans, cucumbers." As a girl she tuned into *Night Tracks*, "a music video show from TBS that aired on weekends from 11:00 p.m. till 4:00 a.m." Texans had "water coolers—air conditioners that fit in the window and blew out water-cooled air." The plot of *Love Can Build a Bridge* is pretty straightforward. Set in a Texas saloon, the play reunites the estranged members of a Texas clan to gather for the funeral of the recently deceased Big Daddy patriarch, pioneering U.S. minimalist Donald Judd. On hand are the Judds—Judd Nelson, Naomi and her daughter Wynonna, and Ashley Judd, the movie star daughter of Donald and Naomi. When the plot called for Judd's will to be read, we brainstormed to present it as a video will, so I got to watch Karla in action making one of her videos. She persuaded George Kuchar to play Donald Judd—cantankerous, visionary, but with a heart of gold. We gathered one evening on Lexington Street for the shoot. The plot called for the video to have been manipulated, after Judd's death, by an unscrupulous attorney, so Kuchar played everything twice, once straight, and once with great contortions and shakes of his eyes and mouth, to indicate the video's own corruption. In essence he was acting out static and jump cuts, all in his face, while improvising his

own lines. Karla crouched behind the camera, trying not to giggle too much. Always she could stare down into the glass square of the video playback screen and determine what needed to give, what needed to be released. It is possible that her theater work has given her an outlet for her social satire and the Hollywood Babylon side of her inspiration, allowing the video pieces to grow increasingly private, and like Martha Graham choreography, ritualistic and spare. Not only the vent of theatrical activity, but an increasing collaboration with Kota Ezawa led to a sea change in her production. Kota and I collaborated on a video installation called *Rocktoberfest at Scene/Escena* [a pioneering Mission District art space] in 1998. We decided to just use solid colors as the image with nine monitors and four VCRs. The color patterns we created were sort of like an illuminated, moving patchwork quilt. This video piece got me thinking in terms of video as sculptural rather than just linear. Out of this digital way of working came my own tape *Kaleidoscope*, as did *IP* that Kota and I also made together. *Kaleidoscope* (2004), a stately celebration of abstraction and its formal beauty, is a sharp departure from the social satire of previous work. Silently four quadrants of the screen rotate inward, as the pieces of colored shapes tilt 360 degrees. We find ourselves watching particular scraps of color to see how close they will come to the edge, or watching them combine at





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the center of the glass, then separate and return like a formal dance. Abruptly the machine comes to a silent close, stopping the gears.

While her other tapes achieve pop perfection by limiting themselves, like Ramones tracks, to one or two minutes long, *White Rainbow* is akin to Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975)—a large canvas filled with colorful characters and odd setups. Or maybe it's more like Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966), for there's the split screen Warhol used, in which the two sides sometimes seem to comment on each other, but more often they co-exist without reference to the other world. *White Rainbow* could be a deeply spiritual experience if you cared about such things, and its characters certainly seem to. Two women and a tall man assemble before a counter, sternly watching something just outside the range of the frame, and sometimes they're goldbricking, killing time with whatever dignity and hauteur they can assemble. I saw an eleven-minute cut of this video, and from what I understand it's still very much a work in progress. They might be atomic scientists I suppose.

Carla Gaytan, the young woman who danced in *Getting Centered* more than ten years before, now plays an ideologue who tries fitfully to convert two vague, stylish Europeans (Andre Niebur and Dietmar Lutz). On another screen men in white prayer suits parade around a tree, crisscrossing each other in view of a cryptically phallic lighthouse. A jam session of acoustic guitars and percussive effects threatens to drive you over the edge, but it goes down beautifully with the strange sequence of the white cotton group assembling for a midnight revel. It looks like the lost footage Kenneth Anger shot of Thelema Abbey's erotic fres-

coes in Sardinia in 1955. *White Rainbow* works out many of the occult implications of Anger's cinema, in video form; it's active as well as satiric or narrative. In its frenzied climax three or four shrouded figures ring round a table and share a goblet of sacramental liquid, like a chalice, which they mime drinking. The "goblet" is actually an oversized wax candle, topped with wine. They're not for everyone, but mysteries are revealed here.

In *Jackie* (2005) a young woman in a spectacular red vinyl tracksuit runs away from the camera toward a line of baseball players in uniforms. These guys just lob balls at one another with lazy ease, while Jackie, huffing and panting, elbows akimbo, approaches them at an aggressive thirty miles an hour, always threatening collision, but backing off at the last minute. One or two of the ballplayers raise a curious eyebrow, but on the whole this video is like a remake of Jane Russell wandering through the absorbed musclemen musing "Ain't There Anyone Here for Love?" in Howard Hawks' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Well, not really, for the viewer is caught up in the spectacle of Jackie getting tinier and tinier as she travels to the park's

Oppositepage:  
 Players from Kevin Killian and DL Alvarez's play *Total Eclipse*, 2004.  
 Polaroid collage by Wayne Smith; reprinted with his kind permission.

This page:  
*Misty Summers* photo series, ca.1991, photographs by Craig Goodman;  
 reprinted with his kind permission.



edge, then as she reverses herself she gets larger and larger, more and more determined, until you fear for the camera's life.

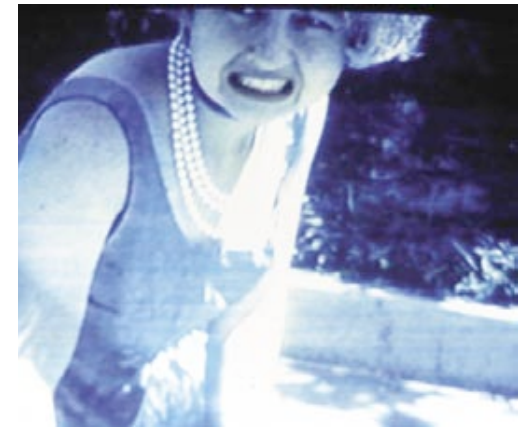
Milosevich's recent projects refocus her take on organized religion and the anarchic drive to renounce faith. In spring 2005 she curated *See Me, Feel Me*, a program of commissioned videos that take up the hippie themes of The Who's *Tommy*, particularly the Ken Russell version from 1975 with its hypervulgar symbolism and darkness. In her new theater piece, *The Red and the Green*, the two rival cults from *White Rainbow* are reconfigured as, on the one hand, red-string-wearing Kabbalah devotees led by Madonna and Demi Moore, and on the other, progressive yet sexually abstemious puritans of a largely fictional "Green Party" led by Barry Bonds, Betty Ford, and Ed Ruscha. The Kabbalah celebrities decide to try to bring to life the dead body of their muse, the late Susan Sontag, while the Greens, predictably, wag fingers and warn of ecological disaster. For the first time in Milosevich's work, an explicitly sacramental act is envisioned.

I asked Milosevich to think of the things that bring San Francisco into focus for her. "Ocean tides going in and out. Fog. Keyboards—Casios. Computers. Old LPs, like Peggy Lee. Black clothes. Acupuncture, Chinese herbs, Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese food. Yoga. Children's playgrounds. Thrift stores. Drag queens and health food markets." While the banality of the "gods" will always astound and bemuse Milosevich, despite herself gravitas is creeping into the frame. Well, why not? In a world without sureties, video keeps its own impossible faith, with science, with rigor, with community, and nearly with the beyond.

Kevin Killian lives and works in San Francisco; he is the author of several books including *Shy*, *Arctic Summer*, *Bedrooms Have Windows*, *Island of Lost Souls*, *Little Men*, and *I Cry Like a Baby*.



This page: Video still from *Blue Lady*, 1993.  
Opposite page: Jackie Sumell in a video still from *Jackie*, 2005.



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