TERESA HUBBARD / ALEXANDER BIRCHLER
FLORA
ON VIEW SEPTEMBER 20, 2019 – APRIL 5, 2020
Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler’s Flora began with an invitation to participate in curator Philipp Kaiser’s vision for the Swiss Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale titled “Women of Venice.” Kaiser wanted to reflect on the most celebrated Swiss artist, Alberto Giacometti, who famously refused to exhibit in this Pavilion during his lifetime, though the building was designed by his brother. Giacometti’s notable absence led the artists to research both the sculptor’s history, as well as the history of the pavilion, which revealed another absence—that of women artists. Through this process, Hubbard / Birchler discovered a sliver of information about a woman in Giacometti’s circle, Flora Lewis Mayo. That she was originally from Denver, had lived in Paris in the 1920s, and was the subject of a well-known sculpture by Giacometti, Tête de Femme (Flora Mayo), 1926, were some of the few details the artists first encountered. Years of research into Mayo’s life, work, identification and mis-identification, and creative and personal voice, now come to the fore in Flora through Hubbard / Birchler’s ambitious efforts.

Introducing the exhibition, Bust (2017) alludes to the artists’ initial discovery of Mayo, featured in a photograph included in the definitive biography of Giacometti by James Lord. That photograph, reproduced here as well, shows her with Giacometti and a portrait bust that she made of him. Hubbard / Birchler’s project radiates out from this starting point, for this is the work that launched their research into Mayo’s history: Lord’s dismissive and sexist description of Mayo had also piqued their curiosity about who she was, why she was treated so cursorily, and what history had elected to ignore. In a sense, the exhibition cumulatively draws Mayo from the margins of the historical record to its very center, tracing the path of her erasure in art history.

What unfolds across the galleries on the museum’s second floor are fundamental questions about how history is constructed, reconstructed, and recalibrated. Hubbard / Birchler have spent years researching this artist’s life, background, her practice, and her family, all of which bring her back to life and give her voice a platform that eluded her during her lifetime.

Memory blurs the contours between fact and feeling, often creating a haze of information that is both reliable and flawed. Research can provide a corrective, substantiating such experiences with reliable and verifiable information. The story of Flora Mayo as presented in this exhibition rests on a fulcrum between the two. The exhibition both connects the dots amongst the different periods of Flora Mayo’s biographical and artistic lives, while also leaving many questions unresolved.
The Joseph Crescenti Gallery bears witness to Mayo’s development, from her family’s roots in Denver to her years as an art student in Paris. What Hubbard / Birchler create in this space is both a testament to a life richly lived, as well as the process that led them to their gripping film installation, on view in the Congdon Gallery. Both revelatory as well as theatrical, examples from the artists’ archival research here highlight a key point: history is as much factual as it is fictive. Newspaper clippings, diary entries, and photographic evidence put forward real events and observations. But examples abound as to how inaccurate such evidence can be as well. For instance, a great irony of this project is that the photograph in Bust had previously misidentified the female figure as Margaret Cossaceanu. Through the efforts of Hubbard / Birchler, a corrected identification now recognizes this woman as Flora Mayo. This slippage suggests how malleable and fragile and how constructed and fraught, the recording of history actually is and how quickly it can dissolve into error.

The unearthing of Flora Mayo’s biography, as achieved by this exhibition, is both about the individual who was sacrificed by her family (into an arranged marriage, in which she had little creative opportunity) and also who sacrificed for them. Flora wrestles forcefully with the gender dynamics that steered Mayo’s life. Hubbard / Birchler pull this out by returning what had been denied to Flora in her lifetime — they reintroduce her voice to the conversation, which is one that is shared with Giacometti and also with her son. Her own words, as recorded in letters and journal entries, share the soundtrack with David’s recollections of his mother, finally endowing her with the agency to describe her desires and intentions. Hubbard / Birchler’s combination of storytelling devices, blending reenactment and documentation, creates a riveting presentation that draws the past into the present and the periphery to the center. In doing so, they reframe the legacy of this artist as one of courage and ambition.

Nora Burnett Abrams
Mark G. Falcone Director

CHECKLIST OF WORKS:
Bust, Flora Mayo and Alberto Giacometti, with the bust she made of him, circa 1927. Photographer unknown. Original photograph belonging to Flora Mayo, kept under her mattress, lost. Film negative missing. Reproduction from only known duplicate print, archive of Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur. Original clay bust portrait of Alberto Giacometti by Flora Mayo, lost. Reconstructed and cast in brass, 2017
Framed silver gelatin print, 35 x 28 3/8 inches
Brass sculpture with concrete base, 60 5/8 x 18 7/8 x 21 inches
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artists and Lora Reynolds Gallery, made possible by support from Suzanne Deal Booth; Michael Chesser; Candace and Michael Humphreys; Jeanne and Michael Klein; Laurence Miller; Shalini Ramanathan and Chris Tomlinson.

Archive, Flora Luella Lewis Mayo, 2018 — ongoing
Museum of Contemporary Art Denver iteration with loans from David Mayo and the History Colorado Collection.

Flora, 2017
Synchronized double-sided film installation with shared soundtrack. Duration: 30 minutes, loop. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Suzanne Deal Booth.
and the entire team of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District.

Creating our work involves the dedication and creative resources of a number of individuals and institutions. We are especially grateful to


We express our deep gratitude to Nora Burnett Abrams and the entire team of the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver for their vision and commitment to this exhibition.

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