



## Mouse Trap Patricia Voulgaris Whitney Hubbs

## About the Artists

**Whitney Hubbs** received her BFA from the California College of the Arts in 2005 and an MFA at UCLA in 2009. She was involved in the punk rock riot grrrl community from a young age, where she made fanzines, organized art shows, and participated in performances. Recent solo exhibitions include *Body Doubles* at M+B Gallery and at the California Museum of Photography, Riverside. Hesse Press published the artist's first monograph, *Woman In Motion*. Her second monograph, *Say So*, was published by SPBH Editions in Spring 2021. She is an Assistant Professor Photography at Alfred University. Hubbs is currently represented by M+B Gallery in Los Angeles and Situations Gallery in New York City.

**Patricia Voulgaris** is an artist and educator from New York. She graduated from the School of Visual Arts in 2013 with a BFA in Photography. Her work has been exhibited in numerous exhibitions including Aperture Foundation, Rubber Factory, Red Hook Labs and Baxter Street at CCNY. Her photographs have been featured in publications such as *Der Greif*, *Vice Magazine*, *Dear Dave Magazine*, *The British Journal of Photography* and *New York Magazine*. She is the grant recipient of the Lucie Foundation, Aaron Siskind Foundation and SVA Faculty Award.

Cover image, *Savior*, 2020, Patricia Voulgaris, courtesy of the artist.

## Mouse Trap

Photography frequently has the power to lure viewers into spaces that consider ideas and emotions they might not expect or want to face. Some images that at first glance appear ordinary can, with closer and longer inspection, reveal themselves to be ominous, outrageous, even sublime. Patricia Voulgaris and Whitney Hubbs excel at creating such confounding and discomfiting images. For the title of this exhibition, they have decided to use the metaphor of a mouse trap to describe images that can entice a viewer's gaze and then, without warning, snap at them. The show's title presents an open question of who is truly empowered; who is the mouse and what is the trap? Will the trap succeed or fail? Both potential outcomes are fraught! And what does it feel like to exist in this ambiguous middle-ground between success and failure?

Patricia Voulgaris is an artist whose creative practice consistently evolves into new forms. She deliberately resists being categorized by a singular style or aesthetic. Previously Voulgaris relied heavily on the studio as a workspace to experiment with self-portraiture. However, recently she has created worlds outside of herself through collaboration, fiction, and narrative. The new work presented contains an ambiguous story of escape and destruction that subtly interrogates the power dynamics between victim and savior.

At the beginning of the exhibition are the photographs *Witches House* and *Witch*. Both of these photographs introduce a sense of fear and our protagonist. The theme of fire and burning as a highly destructive act sets the stage for what will follow. As the sequence continues, we encounter further photographs that are more elusive in meaning. In *Dunk*, for example, a female body is violently pushing someone's head into a metal pail. The tight crop of the image makes the twist of limbs appear manipulated and distorted. This image invokes the brutal history of witch trials, where those who sank were considered innocent, while those who floated were proven witches. Either result assured death. The dynamics and power struggles suggested by this photograph remain confusing. While there are two fiercely opposed characters, their bodies also seem to be working in strange harmony with each other. Perhaps Voulgaris is asking the

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viewer to be comfortable with this ambiguity and not turn away from viewing this disturbing scene. Savior is an equally enigmatic photograph with this character present but almost defeated by the weight of the hose. Here the viewer struggles with the question of who has the power to save another, or does such control lie from within? This photograph reflects Voulgaris' long-term fascination with the concept of 'savior', as she explains:

*"Fairy tales typically involve a storyline in which a man rescues a woman from impending doom. I have always questioned those fables and their capability to influence women at a young age. I have never identified with this tale, and I think it's time to rewrite it. What if there is no one coming to save me?"*

As the installation continues, photographs such as *Untitled* and *Void* further complicate the narrative that *Witches House* and *Witch* first suggested. These subsequent images suggest that destruction can also be a transformative and regenerating process, leading to new realms of existence. Here, Voulgaris encourages viewers to accept the stark fact that destruction exists, whether this is physiological or physical deterioration. She notes:



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*"I tend to find order in chaos, and there is an indescribable magic to it. For me, destruction serves as a reminder to keep going and rebuild from the ashes. There is beauty in the grotesque, which is widely misunderstood, especially in today's society. I'd like more "ugly" things in the world, and I am tired of the privilege of pretty things."*

For Voulgaris, photography and video also seem to offer even more opportunities to complicate gender stereotypes. Her short video *Man in the Woods* depicts a male narrator under threat from a powerful, terrifying, and undefinable nighttime creature while camping in secluded nature. This narrative is another subversion of gender stereotypes that perceive the male as the inevitable savior. There are many unresolved layers at work in this film that the artist leaves us to unpack. This indefinable quality represents Voulgaris's ability to create encounters that make viewers continually negotiate and re-negotiate their assumptions.

Just as themes of fear, drama, and suspense reside throughout Voulgaris' new work, Whitney Hubbs is motivated by how a photograph can be a container for atmosphere and pure feeling. For Hubbs, the allure or bait represented by the 'mouse trap' metaphor is the uncleanliness of her photographs. Since its invention, photography has been used as a tool to recall the world beautifully. However, Hubbs is more interested in using photography as a tool to record what life is like and what life feels like in all its totality. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, and failure are emotions we all experience, and yet these are taboo



Images from left to right, *Dunk*, 2020, *Witches House*, 2021, Still from *Man in the Woods*, 2021. All Images by Patricia Voulgaris, courtesy of the artist.

subjects for most.

Hubbs' recent self-portraiture creates a feeling of suspense while contemplating the female body and those that gaze upon it. Both self-portraits presented use the invitation of Hubbs' gender to draw in the viewer. The artist feels an inherent allyship with female avant-garde artists who similarly used their bodies as a vehicle to taunt viewers. The heightened theatricality of *Untitled (Dolphin)*, for example, shows the artist in what appears to be a provocative pose. Yet, this photograph was not made for the viewer. Dolphins are animals with a particular affinity for Hubbs, linking back to childhood memories of swimming in the ocean of Southern California, and seeing pods of dolphins on the horizon. Hubbs is also expressing her carnal desire to feel connected to nature by performing with her body. While this portrait has elements of performance, Hubbs prefers to see such photographs as part of an expanded field of sculpture. She is interested in documenting the performing body as an object through photography. The resulting photograph perhaps creates a distance from herself and her audience, a safer space to experience emotion than live performance.

*Untitled (Ectoplasm)* is a more visceral self-portrait that depicts the artist in a highly precarious state. Here, the viewer witnesses the artist cathartically expelling a dark liquid from her body. However, the viewer may also be simultaneously repulsed,



as the liquid is held in mid-gravity before imminently degrading the visible female body underneath. Hubbs claims her agency by creating this moment of vulnerability on her terms, regardless of the viewer's potential repulsion. She also exercises supreme control of her craft regarding how this moment is recorded through composition and lighting. While the viewer may find such an image uncomfortable, Hubbs' intention is not to shock her viewer. Instead, she approaches her practice by challenging herself to use her body in safe ways to explore ambiguous ideas such as failure, aging, and disgust. In the process, she performs for the camera alone in order to be seen.

Considered together as a triptych, these three images by Hubbs have a formal and rational connection through the use of color and the theme of moisture (from the sea, clouds, or a spit-out liquid.) However, these three images also invite a contrast, which is unresolved. Hubbs embraces this paradoxical nature of photographs, even those that depict her in abject ways. A section of Maggie Nelson's book *The Art of Cruelty* (2011), which examined cruelty and violence in art, speaks to her for this reason:

"Who would want...a world in which everything nice were partitioned off from everything horrible, thereby draining the world of its wild, nearly unnavigable paradoxes? And who would want a feminism—or any form of social justice—that lessened our apprehension of such difficult coexistences, or diminished our access to this electrical current?"

Patricia Voulgaris and Whitney Hubbs investigate challenging ideas around power and control in images and media, and in real life. These experimental, playful, and risky photographs leave many questions posed by the show's title unresolved. And yet, the palpable sense of drama, suspense, and tension that unite all these works allow me to become more comfortable existing in spaces of emotional uncertainty. Darker emotions such as doubt, fear, and ambiguity, can still connect us.

Images from left to right, *Untitled (Ectoplasm)*, 2022, *Untitled (Dolphin)*, 2022 All Images by Whitney Hubbs, courtesy of the artist.

	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Witches House</i>	2021 Archival pigment print 17 x 25.5 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Witch</i>	2021 Archival pigment print 17 x 25.5 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Dunk</i>	2020 Archival pigment print 15 x 22.5 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Face Without a Name</i>	2022 Archival pigment print 15 x 22.5 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Savior</i>	2020 Archival pigment print 20 x 20 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Untitled</i>	2021 Archival pigment print 15 x 22.5 in Edition of 5	\$1,800

	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Void</i>	2021 Archival pigment print 17 x 25.5 inches Edition of 5	\$1,800
	Patricia Voulgaris	<i>Man in the Woods</i>	2021 Video 1 minute 43 seconds	NFS
	Whitney Hubbs	<i>Untitled (Dolphin)</i>	2022 Archival pigment print 25.5 x 32 inches	Price on request
	Whitney Hubbs	<i>Untitled (Ectoplasm)</i>	2022 Archival pigment print 25.5 x 32 inches	Price on request
	Whitney Hubbs	<i>Untitled (Clouds)</i>	2022 Archival pigment print 30 x 40 inches	Price on request

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Silver Eye Center for Photography is generously supported by our members and individual donors and by the Allegheny Regional Asset District, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Concept Art Gallery, The Heinz Endowments, The Hillman Foundation, the Henry John Simonds Foundation, the Irving and Aaronel deRoy Gruber Charitable Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the PNC Charitable Trust, and the William Talbott Hillman Foundation.