

JASPER SPICERO



Untitled documentary about Jerry Simon and Arbecy, 2019 (still)

CM

There are some visual and thematic through-lines that act as your artistic signature, and are easily detected within your recent projects. These include the color blue, sculptural birds, uniforms as costumes and the actors that you have cast. I'd like to know if they were meant (either at the time, or perhaps now, in hindsight) to directly relate to or build upon one another in any way?

JS

Each project relates to the others and contributes to a greater narrative world. The timelines in the world are warped and branch off toward and away from one another. *Centersin-pain.org* features a character, Judith, who has two bodies. One of the bodies is a boy who lives in a dystopian apartment complex, and the other is a maintenance worker who tends to an empty jail. One day the boy witnesses his adult janitorial twin arriving at the jail. That they are one and the same person is never made explicit. Judith isn't exactly a recurring character, but to me, the character, Ogden, who is the patriarch of *Centinel*, is Judith in a past life. Continuity and exposition in storytelling are less important to me than being imaginative, but there are those few through-lines you mention that anchor everything.

As for the wooden birds, they represent embodiments of grace. Their wings look permanently closed, and some choose to wear special clothing or prizes. I find tremendous joy in giving sentience, history and feeling to inanimate things. Aspiration is a characteristic that I give to many of my sculptures. I hope you can tell that my sculptures are at various points on a road toward realizing their dreams.

CM

I see, so there is certainly a sense of cyclicity that is purposefully imbued into the work, both in the conception of the characters, as well as in the ways that the objects take on anthropomorphized motives?

JS

The Judiths are played by my little brother, Strayhorn Krueger and my childhood friend, Mojo Williams, and they also play the young and old versions of Ogden. They contribute to almost all of my projects. So yes, creating continuity between projects by using the same actors has become an integral part of my world-building practice.

With regard to the uniforms, they are a way of signifying a particular organized world where those wearing them belong. In *The Glady Day* some

of the characters wear a uniform with an embroidered logo that says, "Centennial Elevator Company." I took that logo from a van in Manhattan. When I wondered what that organized world looked like, I came up with an experiential therapy group that promises to elevate people out of their inner prison. So, instead of a company that fixes mechanical elevators in buildings it fixes the forgotten elevators that can exist inside of people.

CM

Wow, I like the idea of an elevator zooming somewhere through me! So, continuing with my questions about the elements of your work that tend to connect one project to another, I also want to discuss their conceptual links; for one, the test-site-like context that a lot of the scenarios within the videos evoke. Both the settings themselves—which appear purposefully makeshift and are often accompanied by miniaturized toys and models—and the delivery of dialog can feel intentionally over-staged, like acting acting... However, some, like *Grand Meadows* and *Centers in Pain* are set in real places. Do you see these videos as engaging with reality, or more with fantasy and fable-making?

JS

When I see a location for the first time, I want to feel like it came from somewhere that has been forgotten in my own mind. So, *Centinel* was filmed at a sanctuary for the blind in Manhattan and at a convent called MaryDell Faith and Life Center; *The Glady Day* was shot in an abandoned office space in Times Square; *Grand Meadows* was inside of a K-12 school in rural Minnesota that doubles as a storm shelter; and *Centers in Pain* is set at a prison that has sat empty since it lost funding shortly after its completion in 2004.

Because locations are dear to me just the way they are, I don't change much about them. I am especially drawn to places that fall short of their purpose. They are often unkempt with beams of their particular form of hopefulness shining through. This could be the makeshift quality you are noting. Makeshift is a good word. Like making do.

When I get to arrange my sculptures in these places it is really like bringing them home. When they end up in galleries or museums, they have the expression of being lost. That expression is beautiful. You're right, the sculptures are small and toy-like. The sculptures are helpers that guide the characters through my videos or at least watch over them from afar, quietly cheering.



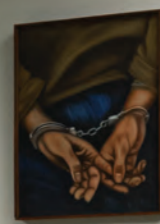
Look Up For Edith, 2019, installation view, Centinel, Swiss Institute, New York

Towering Sentinel, 2019 (detail), installation view, Centinel, Swiss Institute, New York (opposite)





Secure Seat For Meadow Lark, 2019, installation view, Centinel, Swiss Institute, New York (opposite) Aerial view of Grand Meadow School (top)





I approach filmmaking as though I am creating an experiential exercise for the actors. I design scenes and characters to accommodate the real people within them. “No one can play this role except for you.” That is my message. It is my greatest wish that everyone involved has a meaningful and transformative experience.

CM

I can see that coming through in the way that the actors’ behaviors seem to shift, sometimes even within one movie, but more often as they play new roles in successive projects. Another strong component to most of your video work, which probably affects the way that viewers perceive the characters’ behaviors, is the accompanying sound. I loved the way that you incorporated the making of the soundtrack for *Centinel* not only into the visual aspects of the video, but also into how those scenes are woven into the video’s actual narrative. Was this bridging of the two a new direction for you? Can you tell me about that process, and how you see the scenes of the chimes session as relating to the scripted scenes?

JS

As a boy I would bring my handheld cd player to bed at night and listen to the same song over and over again and envision things. That is how I work to this day. Everything I make begins with song. I start by creating a soundtrack from a combination of my own pieces and ones that I find.

In 2016 I was researching videos of bell choirs when I came across an astounding thing. It was that consuming feeling of discovery. A woman in the video introduced Las Vegas’ own blind and visually impaired bell choir. Using modified cell phones and wrist straps, the choir members are sent vibrations that signify when to ring their bells—an automated bell choir that anyone can be a part of, regardless of their circumstances. Jerry Simon is the person who invented the technology. I am now working on a documentary about Jerry’s life story and the bell choir that he assembled at the center for the blind in Las Vegas. The technology is called Arbecy. I’m a part owner of it. Of all the people I’ve met in my life Jerry is the most remarkable. After making a promise to a blind girl, Mary-Anne, in 1977 he dedicated himself to inventing a way for the blind to play music together.

Centinel is about a family of historical re-enactors that are trapped in a continuous loop of soap operatic drama. The film intercuts between the family and a bell choir of blind people. Within the reality of *Centinel*—like when Judith sees himself entering the empty jail-time stretches, rebounds and folds onto itself. Two angels communicate from different dimensions using cell phones. Angel Anna supports the choir, while Angel Tim has spent the past century attempting to disentangle the re-enactors from their perpetual drama. The choir unknowingly frees the family when the resonant sound of their music travels between worlds carrying a message of pure love.

Lately, making lots of space for people to contribute to my creativity has become an even greater pillar of what I do. The cast and crew of *Centinel* expanded to a family of about fifteen. I am preparing for a new film called *The Loving Stars* and I believe that we will amount to at least thirty by then.

CM

That is great. I really appreciate the work that comes from such an ensemble process. Can you tell me a bit more about *The Loving Stars*, and how it furthers your narrative or “world-building?”

JS

The DVD box description is, “A group of inmates, who grew up in the American prison system, are paroled after decades of incarceration. Before returning to society, they are forced to take an experimental, days long train ride together designed by the state to heal prisoners afflicted by isolation and violence.” What happens along the train ride and who the attendants and ticket holders are will remain a surprise for now. As the soundtrack and script near completion, I feel a sense of growing joy about my vision for *The Loving Stars* and realizing it.

Fail Safe 0, 1 and 2, 2014, Centers in Pain, Wapato Jail, Portland (pp. 148-149)
All images Courtesy: the artist

Left Arm 10, 2017, installation view, Living Waterway, New Galerie, Paris (opposite) The set for The Glady Day, 2018, installation view, The Glady Day, Times Square Space, New York (pp. 146-147)

