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ArtReview

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Marnie Weber *When Roses Bloom*

Heidi, Berlin 25 January – 1 March

Marnie Weber's video *House of the Whispering Rose* (2025) ends with a textual dedication: 'Filmed in honor of female storytellers everywhere…' That's apropos, because for the previous 43 minutes a viewer has been led to think about male narrators of women's stories. Filmed, per the handout, 'at the historic Beverly Estate in Beverly Hills, CA', the Los Angeles-based artist's work finds her in character as 'Rose Bloom', an ageing starlet wearing pan-stick makeup, smudgy mascara and a blonde wig, spending a woozy night in her luxurious estate. She rattles around alone save for a monstrous, servile figure in butler's garb – face distorted worse than the Elephant Man's – and statues aligned to Wiccan imagery (their masklike headgear suggesting wizards, owls, crescent moons). These now come to life, detaching themselves from a fountain and the bolsters of Bloom's fairytale four-poster bed to cavort ritualistically. On this darkly enchanted night, Rose also intermittently de-ages, her younger self played by Weber's own daughter, Colette. The scene briefly transfers to a movie set, the 'butler' here directing the young Rose. At the end, holding the strings of myriad helium balloons, the older Rose strides into her swimming pool and lies back, not drowning.

If the initial reference point here is Bette Davis in Robert Aldrich's 1962 film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, the figure of a butler/director and the pool scene also recall *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), another ageing-starlet flick. Elephantiasis, meanwhile, brings in David Lynch. The late director's hallucinatory *Mulholland Drive* (2001) finds another male cineast telling, perhaps enjoying telling, of how Hollywood – as a microcosm of wider attitudes to female ageing – destroys beautiful young women and maybe enjoys doing so. Yet what Weber also takes from Lynch, and repurposes, is nonlinear storytelling. In *House…*, where the only recognisably male character is pointedly deformed, Rose gets older, then gets younger again. After young Rose decides the only way to become immortal is to commit suicide – the bathtub pose she adopts explicitly replicates that of Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793), whose subject, notably, was murdered by a woman, Charlotte Corday – she then comes back to life. Now she's Older Rose in the pool, echoing Shakespeare's Ophelia (and that of the 1851–52 John Everett Millais painting) but, again, not dying. And because this is a looped video, time doesn't really go forward anyway; the cycle simply starts again.

Weber makes her painterly associations explicit elsewhere in the show: while the film is projected at the back of the gallery, six canvases are attached to the pillars in Heidi's showroomlike, glass-sided space. (Down each side of the space are arrangements of balloons and crepe-paper streamers and confetti, a party's aftermath.) The paintings, echoing the film and installation's pink-yellow-green-blue palette, feature Weber/Bloom in a more explicitly Millais-like Ophelia pose, revisit the Marat scene and bring back the creepy statue-figures. Painted in a naive style, they're flat-footed, vaguely productlike things. To recoup them, you must perhaps imagine Rose Bloom painting them in a daze, both caught up in her own story and determined to make it end differently – or, rather, not end at all.

Martin Herbert

House of the Whispering Rose (still), 2025.
Courtesy the artist