



Lutz Bacher, *Moskva* (detail), 2019, 96 digital pigment prints, each 157 x 112 cm
Installation view

grandeur, and how grandeur can be rather intimate.

The first thing I encountered on my trip was *Rocket* (2016–18), which has a subtly confrontational presence in the Contemporary Art Center's lobby. It is an image of a dissected American rocket laid out on a flat, grassy field. The photograph is printed on vinyl, measures twelve by three metres, slants on the left, stretches around the lobby wall on the right, and sags from side to side. Like the NASA space program, this document has been deflated. As the budgets were cut, so were its products. In the program's heyday, the country projected strength and unity. But over time, the laugh tracks of harmless sitcoms have been replaced by the grit of real-life dramas. America's traumas have been revealed, our compromises have been exposed. A gift.

Moving into the main gallery of the CAC, I was overtaken by *Moskva* (2019), a sprawling collection of stories – or more accurately, three books the artist created by getting scrappy with Russian spy novels she regularly read. With scissors, paste, white-out, markers, a scanner, and a copy machine, she made a fairly formal sequence of paper sheets resembling vintage notes on an overhead projector. The language is a bit chaotic at times, but retains a relatively consistent classic Cold War dialogue, with the following bits being some of my choice cuts: FEAR stood for “fuck everything and run”; “Stop being a Russian.”/“What do you mean stop being a Rus –”; “Only the grave will cure the hunchback.”/“I mean your Guilty Penis Syndrome”. There is overt wit and accidental romanticism throughout. But given the current climate, this grouping could also contextually be interpreted as hacked emails, redacted and leaked for political purposes. Another gift.

In a locked auxiliary room adjoined to the right side of the main gallery is *Modules* (2018–19), a dizzying

Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin / Cologne / New York

assortment of thirty choppy videos that repeat over the course of two hours. These moving images provide loose insight into Bacher's preparatory decisions as an artist. She apparently wanted them to function as lessons to students, but many of them come off more as coincidental home videos. Sitting on a utilitarian stool in a room surrounded by tools and wires, staring at random people doing specific things on a small computer monitor, I felt like Chevy Chase's character Clark Griswold in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. There is a scene where the rest of his family leaves the house without him, not knowing his whereabouts; he gets stuck in the attic and ends up watching old family films on a dusty projector. He tears up as he tries to make out the memories. Another gift.

Finally, I walked over to the University Art Gallery, where Bacher's final gift was on display. The two-channel-video projection *Blue Wave* (2019) was shot by the artist from her apartment balcony in New York's Lower East Side over several days in November 2018. This was the halfway point of Donald Trump's first term as president, the month of midterm elections, when there could ostensibly be what the media began calling a “Blue Wave”, a tidal shift in Congress, in which the American public might reject the hijacked Republican Party in favour of largely centrist or left-of-centre Democrats. There was some hope in the effort and the possible outcome, and Bacher saw a symbol for it in the blue tarp that was twice momentarily affixed to a construction site not far from her home. She

filmed it as it fluttered up and down and swayed back and forth in urban, autumnal gusts. These moving metaphorical documents are projected onto the corners of two adjacent rooms, like mirror images, mimicking each other in an otherwise pitch-black fun-house. This piece's origin story might be that of the depressing state of contemporary politics, but it made me think of the impossibility of public sculpture and the everyday poetry sandwiched between concrete and pollution and suffocated by commercial flexing. Nobody needs to fear a Richard Serra falling on them when they can just look up and see a blue tarp popping and locking for them at no expense to them or other taxpayers. What a gift!

Keith J. Varadi

Lutz Bacher
“Blue Wave”

University Art Galleries at UC Irvine
5 October – 14 December 2019

THE
BESTOWER

On the wall text accompanying the late Lutz Bacher's “Blue Wave”, a multimedia exhibition

in four parts and two spaces, the curator Monica Majoli writes, “Lutz gave me gifts.” Immediately, I began thinking about artworks, and the conversations about and around them, as gifts. I guess I could say the same of Lutz. I could say the same of other artists, poets, novelists, actors, filmmakers, and musicians, too.

What is a gift? It can't merely be a transactional or experiential exchange. Many so-called gifts are actually frustratingly foisted upon us. A gift certainly cannot be something that we don't want. But a gift also shouldn't really be something that we request, either, right? It's probably something that we value. We often hold onto items we consider to be precious or sentimental – things that mean something to us,

or others, more than standard-fare wares. But how do we make these distinctions? My mother has photo albums that span decades; some of my friends can't find pictures they took on their iPhones last week. Some folks I know have saved letters from contemptuous exes for years; some immediately throw sweet birthday cards from their grandparents in the trash.

My impression of Bacher is that she has given things that many don't realise they wanted in the first place, which makes her quite the exceptional bestower. She is like a Secret Santa for those who don't believe in capitalism or buy into religion. Her offerings can somehow sneak up on you while in plain sight. Here, on this Orange County campus, you can see for yourself how a simple gesture can have



Lutz Bacher, *Modules*, 2018–19, 30 HD videos, colour, sound, total run time 2 hours 5 minutes 46 seconds
Installation view