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TAMMY RAE CARLAND: "Live From Somewhere" Review

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In "Tipping Point" (2013), chromogenic print by Tammy Rae Carland, entangled step ladders hint at how ambition can lose all sense of direction. Photo: Tammy Rae Carland

Tammy Rae Carland takes seriously the pressure that Americans today feel always to be "on." In the national surveillance state, all serve as unpaid extras, but emergence as a star may spell doom. Although the phantom empire of digital and social media up the pressure to perform rather than live our lives, the work in Carland's "Live From Somewhere" at Silverman evokes an earlier era of aspirations to stage or television celebrity.

Her show samples several bodies of work: handsome, seemingly abstract, black and white photograms made from reflections off disco ball mirrors, color photographs of staged anticlimaxes with props as performers, and simple sculptures with odd social implications.

Several sculptures take the form of single or paired megaphones with handles of the sort once used - in Hollywood myth, if not in fact - by early movie directors. Here they symbolize the desperation to be heard endemic to a mass society continually taunted by images of celebrity and attainment.

Cast acrylic ladders leaning on nearby walls, nearly invisible at a glance, express a common social intuition of vanishing upward mobility. They find a vaudevillian echo in the photograph "Tipping Point" (2013), in which stepladders, having taken the stage, get in a tangle suggesting how easily ambition can lose all sense of direction.

The paired megaphones hint at a more intimate meaning as figures for partners' difficulties communicating. Many of Carland's pieces contain coded sexual slapstick. (Look again at those scissoring ladders.)

The sole video, "Live From Somewhere" (2013), reprises shtick from a stand-up routine by the late Gilda Radner. A hand-guided spotlight scans red stage curtains over and over in search of an act that never appears. Eventually the spotlight turns into the actor, becoming a moon hammily disporting its phases, buying time for a delinquent performer.

As the viewer imagines cycling through excuses for a failure to show, the thought of untimely death as the ultimate exemption arises.

Beginning as an exercise in frustrated expectation, "Live From Somewhere" gradually shifts emotional focus to the fear, secretly shared by all denizens of "spectacular" society, that when our moment comes, we will not be ready.