



Evie Bishop/Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

The 30-minute film *Flora*, part of an exhibition by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler on view at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, explores the life of Flora Mayo, a woman who pursued her artistic dreams amid the glamour of 1920s France.

## VISUAL ART

# Love, art and 'Flora' at the Modern

Watching film at museum is a deeply moving experience

Currently playing in a darkened, second-floor gallery at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth is a deeply moving film that explores love, art and the circumstances that ensue when someone is faced with the choice between following an artistic passion and fulfilling one's duty to others.

*Flora*, by the internationally renowned, Austin- and Berlin-based Irish-Swiss-American team of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler, explores the life of Flora Mayo, who as a young woman was able for a few short years to pursue her artistic dreams amid the glamour of 1920s France.

I'm sure that this will be the most emotionally affecting contemporary art show of the season in North Texas.

When *Flora* premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2017, many viewers were reportedly so moved by the story that they paused from their nonstop activity in order to watch the whole 30-minute film — almost unheard of for a slow, contemplative piece in the midst of a buzzy spectacle.

The story begins with two young aspiring artists in Jazz Age Paris. They fall in love, make portrait busts of each other and enjoy a few months of being young and carefree before life intervenes and sends them on their separate ways.

One of them, Alberto Giacometti, goes on to fame, fortune and a place in the pantheon of modern art. The other, Mayo, is prevented from following her dreams by family circumstances and returns to the U.S., eventually working as a single mother for many years in difficult, low-paying jobs until her death in 1972.

Hubbard and Birchler resolved to uncover her history after researching female artists and noticing that Mayo had been neglected in — if not entirely erased from — accounts of the period, particularly in the renowned yet notoriously sexist biography of Giacometti by James Lord.

In doing so, the artists' painstaking research into Mayo's biography led them to an individual previously unknown to art history, who turns out to be one of the stars of the show: Mayo's son, David, now in his 80s and living comfortably in Southern California. Before being approached by Hubbard and Birchler, David had known of his mother's time in Paris, but he had no idea who Giacometti was or how her story had been represented in the history books.

In an understated conversation with the camera, David relates his memories of his mother and her family history, gratefully remembering her enormous sacrifices for his sake. He recalls her final trip to Paris later in life, when at great cost she made a doomed attempt to recapture some of the magic she remembered from her time there as a young woman.

As Mayo's story is told on screen, its central axis turns out not to be her brief, torrid affair with Giacometti, but instead the lifelong affection she shared with her son. In the gallery, this two-sided relationship is presented in an innovative format: a double-

sided film installation with a single shared soundtrack.

Thus, on one side of the screen, viewers watch David as he tells Mayo's story in the bright California sunshine, while on the other side of the screen an actress plays Mayo in her Paris studio in 1927.

On the soundtrack, a voiceover narration representing Mayo's perspective on her Paris years alternates with David's recollection of his mother, so that at any given moment, one of them appears to be silently listening to the other. Crucially, however, since it is also physically impossible for viewers to see both sides of the film at once, watching it produces a sense of absence, as we listen to someone whom we can't see.

Watching the story of Mayo's life as told from these two perspectives, viewers are led to reflect on some of the deep questions about art and life: *Will any of this outlast us? What if I fail to achieve my dreams? Will anyone remember me?* David's understated love and respect for his mother, in contrast to her cruel dismissal in Lord's biography, is the emotional high point of the film.

Before entering the screening room, viewers are prepared for watching *Flora* by an initial gallery that contains Hubbard and Birchler's *Bust*, an artwork in two parts. The first is a small photograph of Mayo with Giacometti in 1927, seated on either side of the bust portrait she made of him.

The original print, which Mayo kept under her mattress, is now lost and known only through duplicates. Its illustration in Lord's book was the first clue that inspired Hubbard and Birchler in their quest.

The second part is a reconstruction of Mayo's clay bust of Giacometti, cast in brass by Hubbard and Birchler, sitting as a mute testimony to that brief moment when the two connected. From this slender reed, the entire rich tapestry of the film *Flora* was woven.

Following the cathartic experience of the film, viewers are led into a lower-key denouement: a third gallery showing *Archive, Flora Luella Lewis Mayo, 2019-21*. This is a display that includes both selections from the artists' working materials for the project (such as storyboards, filming script and sketchbooks), as well as the small number of original documents they used to reconstruct Mayo's story (such as photographs and newspaper clippings from her time in France in the 1920s).

The archive suggests how "cold" impersonal historical documents and "hot" personal expressions of artistic passion, however distinct in form, can be intimately intertwined.

Curator Andrea Karnes has developed a relationship with Hubbard and Birchler over many years, including a memorable 2008 survey exhibition of their work at the Modern, which led eventually to the museum's 2019 acquisition of *Flora* and *Bust*, and now to the triumph of this show.

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Nan Coulter/Special Contributor

Hubbard (left) and Birchler decided to make their short film after noting that the history books had largely ignored Mayo's artistic contributions. In the work, David Mayo (below) discusses his late mother.



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## Details

"Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: *Flora*" continues through Jan. 16 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 3200 Darnell St., Fort Worth. Open Wednesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesdays from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Adults \$16; seniors, military and first responders \$12; students \$10; under 18 free. Half-price admission on Sundays, and free admission on Fridays. 817-738-9215, themodern.org.