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Don't Touch Anything: Cat Power Covers Bob Dylan and Takes in Marc Hundley's Epic Show at New York's Canada Gallery

On the eve of her 12th record, 'Cat Power Sings Dylan,' the musician Chan Marshall visits a gallery and reminisces about her art world past.

Don't Touch Anything is a column where William Van Meter takes a fabulous person to a noteworthy exhibition.

It was late September at Canada gallery in Tribeca, and the musician Chan Marshall was intently admiring Marc Hundley's billboard-size painting of a backlit Achilles at dusk, his sword and shield held aloft. Behind him, partially obscured, the word "nature" is printed in a large white font. "I love this one," she said and emulated his warrior pose. "It looks like he's defending the earth."

Marshall turned her head and remarked, "The gold background color could be climate change." The gilded hue accentuated the rose-gold grill that covered the bottom row of her front teeth. Marshall's other accessories were large brass statement hoop earrings, an oversized Panama hat, and a camouflage army surplus coat worn as a cape. On the back was her self-designed insignia rendered in electrical tape: enigmatic and rune-like, it's a united "C" and "P" that stands for Cat Power, the sobriquet she records and performs under. A visionary songwriter, her voice is incomparable.

Marshall looked across the room at the silver-tinged *The Narcissus of Pompeii*, the other key piece that bookends the exhibition, a depiction of a statue lost in his own beauty. "It looks like he's staring at a cellphone—self-obsessed while lava flows and the world is burning." Hundley's "The Vanity of Human Greatness" closes on October 22, and it's a deft study of pop graphics and blurred art styles interplaying with flourishes of the profound. Besides the dramatic Roman centerpieces, Hundley recreates film stills and advertisements, appropriating images from old books and dictionaries.



The musician Chan Marshall stands outside of Canada gallery on September 22, 2023. Photo: Elvin Tavaréz.



Chan Marshall admires Marc Hundley's *Nature* (2023). Photo: Elvin Tavarez.

Marshall's next full-length, her 12th, also deals with covers. *Cat Power Sings Dylan* is out November 10 and preempted by three sold-out Los Angeles performances. The album sounds both utterly vital and like a throwback: indie enough for her hardcore fans who see her as her generation's Dylan, but universally pop enough to cross over to his own fans and a wider realm. Recorded in 2022 at London's Royal Albert Hall, it's a track-by-track recreation of the historic 1966 "Dylan goes electric" show, his post-Newport Folk Festival concert that rendered his European fan base apoplectic amidst cries of "Judas!" from the audience. Marshall's vocals sound utterly confident. "My hands were shaking so bad I had to make fists and shove them down into my suit jacket pockets to control my nerves," she said, and walks up to the floral-patterned *They thought he would fight fiercely* (2023). In Hundley's statement on the show, he equates the work with bullfighting and women's love of true crime.

Cat Power Sings Dylan will be Marshall's first live album, but the fourth collection of covers since 2000's plaintively powerful benchmark *The Covers Record*. It's required listening and opens with the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," but sans swagger and chorus, slowed down to a lament. Marshall often celebrates a song by deconstructing it, adding her own lyrics, discarding passages, completely changing the music—mind-melding with the songwriter and creating a pastiche. Earlier in her career these would often come off as channeling sadness and pain, a psychic howl. "To me they sounded triumphant," she said. When unruly audiences would jokingly call out for the Lynyrd Skynyrd anthem "Free Bird," she'd respond with a straight-faced somnambulant dirge. On her last collection, 2022's *Covers*, she turned Bob Seger's cheeseball power ballad "Against the Wind" into a building squall.

"How you might enjoy the song by turning on your radio or putting on the record, I enjoy the song by singing it," Marshall said. "I can hear things in my head that aren't there," she said of her process. "I don't know how to describe it. They look like dense colors that are moving. I can't hear them exactly, but I know that the notes go up or down, or whatever. I have no idea what I'm doing, but my brain knows what it needs to be. My subconscious has heard what it could be. I'm just scrambling to articulate what my subconscious heard." As such, Marshall doesn't strive for duplication. "The only way I'm going to be able to personally believe that I'm

covering the song,” she said, “is if I fuck it up a little bit. Because I’m the one that has to like it and believe it.” The result is often unrecognizable from the original.

Except when it comes to Bob Dylan. Dylan has *a/ways* been sacrosanct when she’s done a rendition. “I don’t want to do anything wrong,” she said quietly. “He’s the Mount Everest of American songwriters. I wanted to do something that feels super-monumental, to make sure that my respect for his songs was in alignment.”



Cat Power’s Chan Marshall visits Marc Hundley’s exhibition “The Vanity of Human Greatness.” Photo: Elvin Tavarez.

Marshall was raised by her grandmother and then shifted between her parents who introduced her to Dylan’s records at around six years old. “Listening to Bob, it was almost like a magic spell or listening to a fable,” she says, and takes a seat on a bench underneath *Cigarette (for James)* (2023). This room in the gallery is supposed to emulate an outdoor streetscape, the paintings doubling as advertisements. Hundley is also a skilled furniture maker and crafts all of the seating and structures in his shows by hand (he also made a carpet for this one). As Marshall pretended to smoke underneath the recreation of Roy Lichtenstein’s enormous cigarette, Hundley, who was popping by to meet a potential buyer, came over and hugged Marshall and explained the theme of his exhibition.

“I read *The Castle of Otranto* [1764], which is the first gothic novel,” Hundley said. “I liked it in the book when Horace Walpole said, ‘Behold the vanity of human greatness!’ I was like, oh my god. We think we’re so great, and we’re not sustainable. We love killing each other. We’re sitting on the top of a food chain with a gun.” Hundley’s vision isn’t nihilistic, though. His show riffs on different art movements, the dial twisting through eras with themes exploring violence,

peace, and joy, and hidden within are deeply personal obscured vignettes, addresses, and birthdays—Easter eggs to friends and loved ones, a mode Marshall can appreciate, with shoutouts buried within her deeply personal biographical lyrics.

Hundley leaves and Marshall and I go to a large bench centered in front of *Narcissus*. She sits on the floor and outstretches her legs underneath it like a child at a coffee table. I sprawl atop like it's her piano and I'm going to warble torch songs. Marshall's style of piano and guitar playing are rudimentary, primal and distinctive. "I don't know how to play, I was never taught," she said. "I don't know chords, I just find something that I like in my head and I play it."

Marshall and Hundley met peripherally in the 1990s, when 'downtown' was a much smaller concept, with a vibrant Lower East Side scene centered around the Ludlow Street bar Max Fish. Marshall was constantly touring. Both were dear friends of Ben Cho, an ahead-of-his time (and now much-copied) fashion designer who was also a connector of creatives in disparate realms, and in a sense the glue that held the scene together. He overdosed in 2017 and



Marshall sits atop a bench at Hundley's show. The artist makes all of the seating for his exhibitions. Photo: Elvin Tavarez.

Marshall sang "I'll Be Seeing You" at his memorial service, where she became better acquainted with Hundley and his twin brother.

The gallery was now bustling with a Friday crowd, and some sneered at us appearing overly comfortable and slovenly. We ignored them and they swirled around and soon seemed to disappear. Achilles was watching over us. Marshall decamped to Miami around 2005, but has kept a room in an East Village apartment since 1994. As she reclined in the gallery, she mused about how she might have taken a very different path. "Before I started singing and writing

songs in Atlanta, I was always painting,” she said. “I knew that I would be a painter. But when I moved here, my objective wasn’t to be in a band or to be an artist. I just had to get out of the South.”

Cat Power began as a four-piece band in Atlanta (two of the members have since died). Marshall and the drummer moved to New York in the winter of 1992. The situation swiftly became dire. “It was freezing cold on Bleecker Street and it was snow up to the knees,” Marshall recalled. “I didn’t have any job. I didn’t have any money. My roommates were about to evict me. I went into a store because snow was blowing sideways and I was pretending that I was going there to shop.” The attentive salesperson would turn out to be a lifeline. “I went in the dressing room and I just couldn’t stop crying,” Marshall said. “I felt so stupid. I was trying on this, like, thong one-piece situation, and I showed her and I was bawling and I couldn’t speak. It was before I could look people in the eye. But then she started asking me questions like, ‘What’s wrong?’”

The salesperson hooked Marshall up with a temporary job at the boutique and then with an ongoing gig at Todd’s Copy, a now-mythic Xerox joint that was also an art-world nexus on Mott Street. “Kiki Smith, Jim Jarmusch, Nan Goldin, Barbara Ess, Vincent Gallo, John Giorno—he was a buddy—all these people were coming in,” Marshall recalled. “Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore used to work there, before my time.”

The Cat Power duo gigged at experimental venues like ABC No Rio and Bicycle. “There was none of that rock-and-roll posturing,” Marshall said. “None of that cool vibe. It was just real expressive. People weren’t locked into a genre. I didn’t know how to sing, I screamed.”

The copy shop segued to a career as an art assistant, first with the sculptor Carol Kreeger Davidson. “She was brilliant, but damn, she was tough,” Marshall said. “She was just hard on me. You know how that New York vibe can be really tough. She had these huge bronze sculptures. My job was to move it from point A to point B without a dolly, so it was a living nightmare.” Marshall switched camps when she met another artist with a studio in the same building in the freight elevator, the sculptor Joan Giordano (who thankfully worked in paper). “She could tell I was poor by the way I was dressed,” Marshall said, who was simultaneously working as a nanny, bartender, and housekeeper. She sees the artist as a savior during this struggling period. Marshall paid her homage years later—that’s a 1978 Giordano sculpture on the front of *The Covers Record*.

Marshall dreams of being able to go to an artist’s retreat. She still draws and takes photographs. “In my 20s, I would paint in acrylic with muted, pale colors on thick, raw, unbleached paper—expressionistic faces of friends and strangers from photos I would take from around the world. In my early 30s I started using metal tools and thick brushes with wide, pointless strokes, with same muted pale colors on large canvases. They were all abstract; I was painting for the direct ‘healing feeling’ I had been missing. Then in my late 30s I did some large, minimal, fine pencil and charcoal figurative drawings with one or two points of acrylic color, with short texts.” Most of her paintings were destroyed in a flood in her Atlanta home. “I have a small painting I salvaged,” she said. “I painted it from a Polaroid I took from the back of a speeding van, on the desolate highway from Tanzania to Mozambique.”

The following day Marshall was off to England to visit the artist Tracey Emin. “We became friends over Instagram during the pandemic,” she explained. “She came to the Dylan show. We were wearing the same outfit, three-piece black suits. Sorry to everybody else who’s a female, but she’s my favorite female living artist.”

After the next month's Dylan shows, Marshall is excited to concentrate on her own material. She has three months booked to record the next studio album and will be producing it herself, as well as playing all the instruments. "It's a tearjerker," she said. "Get your fucking Kleenex ready." Some songs are new, others have been gestating for 20 years. She's excited for her next chapter.

"When I had my son, there was a lot I had to work through," she said. "A lot of life changes that I was going through at the time. The phone just stops ringing for a lot of women who have children. There's a lot less opportunity for artists, actresses, anybody in the field of any work. I feel like it should be the opposite." She went on, "Not being a kid anymore and being sober 152 days today, I am now able to see the support I have around me. I feel like I'm at the beginning of something again."