

Love & More

Olivia Cole

Writer, Poet and Journalist

In one of the quintessential Romantic poems of all time, John Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn, the young poet zeroes in on the decoration on a priceless antiquity. He sees the human figures freeze-framed in their happiest moments, reaching towards each other: the leaves that will never fall, the bud that is always about to flower, the kiss not quite captured, the moment never passing, instead suspended in a state of 'happy love, more happy happy love!' Drawing on his visits to the British Museum (and perhaps on his reaction to the Elgin marbles which had recently been shown in London for the first time in 1816) he sees the 'mad pursuit' and chase around the vessel as a commitment to being in the present that haunts him as he hovers in the chilly museum and worries about perfecting his poems, perhaps at the expense of living. That tension becomes only more moving in light of the very few years that Keats, who died aged just 25, had left of his own.

From the moment I first saw a handful of vintage props gathered in the artist's studio in 2021, and heard about Nina Mae Fowler's ideas for this extraordinary project, I have been transfixed by her sleight of hand in deciding to make her own collection of contemporary urns. Her fragile vessels immediately brought to mind this moment of bitter-sweet perfection in the famous poem. Rather than anonymous figures like Keats's sketchy inspirations, the models for these sculptures are, in the case of Marlene Dietrich, one of the most famous women and familiar faces in the world. A modern myth, a screen goddess, yet here she is, depicted in a wholly new role, as a nurturing maternal figure and grandmother. Hitherto this is not a narrative we associate with Dietrich, not least because the studio didn't want her to be thought of as such, turning her husband and young daughter Maria into a secret kept out of the public eye.

Her sensuality, distinctive glamour and provocateur's statements created a cult following, yet beyond the smoke and mirrors of image making, she was fiercely protective of her privacy, refusing as she wrote, to be treated like a Hollywood clown. As she wrote, 'I never kept a diary. I never took myself seriously enough to record the trivia of everyday life, for which I lacked the necessary self-centredness. Where others might have succumbed to it, I was always indifferent to the glitter of fame. I found it troublesome, crippling and dangerous. I detested it. Unlike most actors and actresses, I hate to behave like a "star" and to be a target of the curious on the street or at an airport. Admiration from unknown persons leaves me cold. The fame that can completely alter the personality of a human being has no power over me. Why? That's how I am, and I can't be otherwise.'

Her letters to her beloved grandson Michael Riva as a child and as a young man coming of age, are as frank as the diary she didn't ever keep. 'Paramount Studios had strictly forbidden any mention of my maternity... The studio executives were of the opinion that motherhood didn't suit the "femme fatale" role I was supposed to play' Dietrich wrote in her memoir. After she left Germany, years of her daughter Maria's childhood passed before she was allowed to join her mother in California. Marlene's time with Michael, born in 1948, seemed to give her a second chance in the role of a maternal figure, which she relished. Their formative bond left her feeling as though his soul was 'cuffed' to hers, embarrassed by their intimacy when in the presence of others. 'How will we communicate' she asked him, 'walls are thin.'

With access to a cache of unseen family material, this series responds powerfully to their correspondence. We see Michael as a baby and a toddler in arms, the two of them delighting in each other's physical nearness and safety.

The mouth of the famous seductress is thrown back here in love, and in laughter in works that catch and transmit her joyful abandon to a small child and his antics and chaos. They vividly conjure the messier unguarded domestic side of Dietrich – the ‘Massy’ as she was to her family, who loved to nurture, and to cook for her family and to concentrate on minor productions such as her little grandson’s breakfast on her balcony, or Christmas presents for her family so innumerable that they would take whole days to open.

These sculptures speak so powerfully of that little boy Michael Riva and his very famous grandmother Marlene but have a far wider significance too. In place of priceless porcelain, here are simple utilitarian kitchen vessels: from mixing bowls to jelly moulds, juice glasses and even a com-forting take-away carton or two. These aren’t precious antiquities in the British Museum or the Getty, but imperfect household items, of the right period, found by the artist: ordinary objects that become just as mythical through loving repetitiveness. Moved by Michael’s adoration of his grand-

mother, in a little shrine to her own formative years, Nina even included her grandmother’s own wooden spoon. What’s one a penny or quotidian, can become even more priceless, through love and habit and use.

With deeply moving resonances on love’s power to nurture, and the simple power of caring for another human being through food, and care and attention, in the words of the Song of Songs, and they are cups that runneth over, spilling over with love and a pure contentment that can’t be contained. Rather than a part of life to be kept behind the scenes, an attitude the studios espoused with often disastrous consequences for the private lives of stars and their children well into the 1950s, taking day to day care of children takes centre stage here. The kinetic style of these sculptures seems to hold the constant movement and energy of very young children: a lived experience for the artist juggling real children and their limitless energy as well as sculpted ones, as well as a detail which struck a chord with me, getting to know this archive and Nina’s response whilst caring for my own young son. Both of us responded to Dietrich’s unfettered enthusiasm for life with young children, who live so easily in the minute, because they have no real sense of time beyond the present moment.

But how did this chance for such a nuanced new look at Marlene Dietrich come about? In 2019, Fowler, a lifelong Dietrich obsessive, planned a research trip to Los Angeles, and serendipitously met Wendy Mickell who was married to Dietrich’s grandson, Michael Riva, who grew up to be an Academy Award nominated production designer. As the father of a young family and at the zenith of his own creative powers, Michael died tragically young, in 2012, aged just 63. Michael’s wife Wendy had long wanted to honour the most special moments in Michael’s relationship with his grandmother. This project began to take shape when Wendy shared with Nina the correspondence between the two of them, as well as Michael’s huge collection of never before seen family photographs. Nina’s tender and forensically detailed drawings and these sculptures developed from time spent in that archive. It’s particularly apt for this unknown chapter in Dietrich’s life to be shown here in Paris, not too far from where Dietrich based herself on the Avenue de Montaigne – writing much of her half

of this extraordinary correspondence – and so close to the streets and places mapped in Michael’s memories of his happy childhood time with her.

The most tempting clichéd phrase for a literary dis-covery like this is a treasure trove but, it’s no exaggeration to use that here. With letters criss-crossing the Atlantic over four decades, Michael and Marlene maintained a confessional intimacy, a totally unguarded immediacy, despite the gypsy-ish life both of them embraced for the sake of their work. They had a kind of language of their own – as she put it, as though ‘the genes skipped a gene-ration.’ As editor for the project, it has been nothing short of a thrill to spend time with this material, to get to know both Marlene and Michael through their words to each other. Michael’s detailed appreciation of the physical world and

life's simplest pleasures is a recurrent theme in his letters, a *carpe diem* mentality that seems unbelievably poignant to read now.

Perhaps John Keats tender imagination and capacity for feeling too much was already in my mind as I turned from the archive to Nina's response, which I was able to see taking shape over the past three years. Reading the letters, with their fierce, visceral immediacy, despite the distance, and the older Dietrich's self-imposed exile from life, I kept finding myself with Keats in mind. By her final years, the gap between Marlene the myth and Marlene the living woman seemed so horrifying to her that she preferred to place herself under house arrest rather than risk bad photographs undermining her public persona. As well as his poems, Keats was one of the great letter writers, out of necessity as for so much of his life he was separated by ill health and geography from the people that he loved. Michael and Marlene's letters, with their vast reserves of feeling and of commitment to artistic ambition, time and again made me spend time thinking about the questions Keats explored so eloquently: what it means to be an artist, and what it means to try and live with a deeply romantic sensibility.

Writing to his grandmother as a young man, Michael Riva described their shared qualities and her voice, literal and internalised, as 'an end to a kind of loneliness.' From an early age, he was delighted to find himself understood, whether it was in writing to her of his passion for a video camera, or more seriously finding his way as a student at UCLA and in his earliest work on film sets. 'Always these strange places' he termed them, where the two of them could find themselves feeling so at home. She was his captive encouraging audience for his artistic coming of age, which is in these letters all the way to working on his first major projects from *The Goonies*, to *The Color Purple* and Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1990. An admirer of Robert Redford's work, this in particular, was an achievement which delighted her. They shared an artist's sense of being at a bit of a remove from the everyday and the ability to step back and watch: Dietrich as a poet, Riva as a great atmospheric letter writer, a master of mood even when using just his typewriter and words rather than the full magic set of film effects to which he eventually graduated. He is described by Steven Spielberg for whom he did some of his best-known work, as having 'the most perfect eye for detail I have ever seen.' Dietrich was so proud of his achievements that she kept a list of his credits by her bed, so as to be on top of his latest achievements when talking on the phone which by now, along with her letter writing, was her life line to the world outside her apartment.

Here are Marlene's mixing bowls, pencil pots, jelly moulds and even take away cartons: the detritus of a life. These are the landscapes and domestic clutter of love – as Riva, the camera obsessed grandson who grew up to have his own extraordinary career, held in his mind's eye. Like a jewel, he held on to the memory of breakfasts on the balcony of her apartment on the Avenue de Montaigne, amidst her pots of geraniums: inspiration for the glass of orange juice placed here. He wrote of his almost unbearable nostalgia for teaching his younger brother to sledge on a little hill in Central Park that seemed to them like a mountain, and the second-hand story (too young to remember but repeated in family lore) of the film star dressed up as a nanny wrapped up to push the baby in the pram, and constantly crossing the street to find the sunshine, which he saw as a beautiful distillation of the uncomplicated happiness of life looking after a young child.

In Nina's sculptures, Michael and Massy are present as two simple human figures. These intimate moments, life's sunniest simplest pleasures, were touchstones that the two returned to their whole lives: in their dreams, in their missing of each other and in their long-distance correspondence. 'I kiss you' is Marlene's often repeated present tense mantra, despite the reality of space and time. Michael dreamed vividly of the comfort he had from her as a child, understanding more as an adult just what this sense of total security as a child had given him.

There is so much love here but of a different kind to Dietrich's famously tortuous long distance love affairs, forever melancholically longing for some love object just out of reach, forever falling in love again... and again. A highlight are the poems she would include with their correspondence, insight into a woman whose girlish sense of wonder and relatively innocent romance, she held on to her entire life, irrespective of the often increasingly painful realities of her private life. To her bookish grandson, Massy could (like religious relics) send on Hemingway's cigar papers. We can wonder forever about the identity of the lover whose unclaimed watch haunted her, left by her bed, as described in a poem discovered here. 'You left your wrist-watch,' she writes, 'will you return/to claim both/it and me?'

For his part, in his letters to her, or when he was hijacked by hearing her recordings, Michael Riva remembered his grandmother, not as a glamorous film star, nor as the tormented figure of her later years but as the nurturing figure of his childhood and gently bad influence of his teenage years. This was the woman who he could visit in Paris, in the time when she was still happy to go out to the cinema or in the neighbourhood. In a denouement no-one could have predicted, Nina's new work is finally being shown after the strangest of times. So many people in the world's innumerable lockdowns and quarantines got a taste of living reclusively, cut off from the everyday and experiencing perhaps just a taste of what it was like for Dietrich or Keats: exiles from their own lives, and living sometimes through verbal communication alone.

All the huge unresolved drama of Dietrich's story and her many other love stories is out of shot here in these moments in time: Michael and Massy are here quite literally bursting out of these vessels, their palpable joy in each other's presence tangible to us here now, all these years after the event. But in their breakable fragility, they are a reminder of the fleetingness of that time, as well as the more complex context of these moments of bliss. Whilst Nina's figures have an endless kinetic immediacy, in their correspondence, there is Dietrich's longing and hankering for the child who has grown up and flown her nest (for all her pride in his achievements) along with Michael's wistful recollection of the ease with which a maternal figure can soothe the small problems of a small child.

Whilst his childhood memories were in the past, we can see from his writing that Michael Riva was still trying to understand in full his extraordinary grandmother when Marlene Dietrich died in 1992. But with his own young family, he put into practice the lessons Massy had taught him on what is most important in life. This project shares and celebrates Michael and Marlene's capacity for living, just as much as the dazzling art that they both gave the world.

Nina Mae Fowler's final ingredient came from an old vintage typewriter, the like of which (long before email) Michael and Marlene both sat down at which to write their long letters. As our team for this project met in the most modern of ways: on Zoom, able to jump remotely into each other's studios and work spaces, I wondered what on earth Marlene Dietrich would have made of that technology. Would it have seemed to her a luxury to move around the world, and be near to those that she loved? Or just another camera invading her mysterious private space? Here, Nina talked enthusiastically about the pleasure she took in breaking down the old-fashioned machine for corresponding to its core elements: each clunky letter, and the delicate ribbon that loops around: inky, messy, infinite. It's an apparatus that's both pragmatically engineered and yet also richly symbolic when considering a long-distance relationship kept alive over the decades and across oceans through the written word. Wendy Riva's generous sharing of the archive material, and these works made in response, invites us all into Marlene and Michael's shared world, privileged to witness their pure delight in each other. Thanks to the artist's conjuring, it seems time has paused: or at least, we can pretend that it has, for just as long as you spend here in their company.

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