

Lenka Clayton

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Lenka Clayton: The Distance I Can Be From My Son at the Blanton

In a series of amusing videos, the artist sheds light on the judgment calls parents make while balancing their children's safety and autonomy

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Lenka Clayton: The Distance I Can Be From My Son, 2013 (still) (courtesy of Blanton Museum of Art)

In the opening scene of Lenka Clayton's video installation *The Distance I Can Be From My Son*, a toddler waddles down the grassy hillside of a city park. At first, he looks back at the camera, hesitant to go any farther, but eventually he's off, stumbling toward trees in the distance. Just as he's about to enter the woods, his mother comes into view and races after him. The screen goes black, and the measurement "55.8 yards" appears.

A similar scenario plays out in two more settings: an alley in Pittsburgh and a grocery store aisle. In each clip, the young boy walks several yards away from the camera before Clayton runs after him. Then measurements flash on screen: 45.9 yards and finally 18.6. On view at the Blanton Museum of Art, Clayton's video installation sheds light on the judgment calls parents make while balancing their children's safety and autonomy.

The videos are part of a larger project called "An Artist Residency in Motherhood," a three-year residency Clayton created for herself in 2011 out of her home. Both humorous and honest, Clayton's work subverts societal expectations of motherhood. While artists' residencies are typically intended to give artists an escape from real-world responsibilities so they can focus solely on their art, Clayton suggests these responsibilities are fertile ground for creation. Instead of working on her art despite being a mother, Clayton turns motherhood into art itself.

On the surface, *The Distance I Can Be From My Son* is amusing. In the second clip, for example, Clayton's son is bundled up in a puffy red jumpsuit with a pointed hood, resembling a tiny Teletubby. He bobbles down the gravel-lined alley behind their home. Every few yards, he turns around and faces the camera, where his mother sits, as if to make sure she's still there. As he moves farther and farther from view, the anticipation builds. When will Clayton give in? In the third clip, the boy trots down a fluorescently lit aisle at a supermarket. The moment the boy turns the corner and is out of sight, Clayton bolts after him, and playful laughter escapes in the background.

A delightful sense of childish wonder permeates the videos, too. In the initial clip, the boy races down a green hillside. Something in the grass catches his attention, and he stops to examine it closely before running again. In this moment, viewers get a pure and endearing glimpse into the special moment in a child's life when he's exploring the world alone for one of the first times.

Underneath the lighthearted surface of the videos, though, Clayton's maternal worry is palpable. Each time she chases after her son, the video cuts off just before she catches him. Never do we experience alongside her the relief that comes with their reunion. Perhaps this is Clayton's intention. By keeping viewers immersed in a state of unease, she calls attention to the pangs of motherhood. She cannot escape the worry that her son will encounter danger, even in seemingly benign places like a park or local supermarket.

By approaching this project like one might approach a science experiment, Clayton subtly and tactfully lays out the many conflicting facets of maternal attachment — love, anxiety, joy, loss of control. *The Distance I Can Be From My Son* proves the everyday responsibilities that come with parenting are far from mundane. When you become a parent, every moment is ripe with emotion. What better inspiration can an artist ask for?