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GALLERIES



Althea Thauberger's *La mort e la miseria*, as seen in "To Be Real"

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To Be Real Using video to depict reality isn't as straightforward as you'd think

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BY DAVID BALZER October 13, 2010 14:10

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Nov 27, Wed-Sat, noon-5pm. Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, 401 Richmond W, ste 124. 416-591-0357. www.prefix.ca.

Emerging curator Rose Bouthillier calls her new, three-artist group show "To Be Real." For some, that may recall Cheryl Lynn's 1978 disco hit "Got To Be Real" and associated ideas of queer-subcultural "realness" (such as RuPaul's use of the term in the reality show *Drag Race* to suggest the convincing simulation of something beyond one's class, race, sexuality, gender, etc.). It turns out Bouthillier is more interested in what the exhibition press release calls "pseudo-ethnographic image-making," but it's all of a piece. In simple terms, these three artists make videos depicting realities that are not their own, and strive, often ironically, to give them the degree of authenticity we've come to expect from such depictions.

There is, consequently, a dissatisfaction built into the works, which may or may not tickle your fancy. Of the three videos, Lars Laumann's *Berlinmuren* seems the most distant and obtuse. From what I gather, it's a video about a woman, Eija-Ritta Bertiner-Mauer, who collects things, and claims to have fallen in love — romantically and perhaps erotically — with the Berlin wall (at one point she holds up a maquette of it, and describes the possibility of having a kind of intercourse with objects). *Berlinmuren* is understated and at times garbled — literally so, for Bertiner-Mauer's thick accent is difficult to discern. Still, one gets the dubious treat of an epilogue in the form of a poorly-recorded David Hasselhoff concert, stripped of sound, in which he wears a leather jacket tricked out with blinking white lights.

More intriguing are outings by Vancouver's Althea Thauberger and Portland, Oregon's Helen Reed. Thauberger's *La mort e la miseria* (pictured) is one of the culminations of her collaboration in Northern Italy with a small ethnic population who speak Ladin, an ancient Romance language. The six-minute video allegory, taken from regional poet Vigilio Iori, tells of a personified Poverty banishing Death from a village. Thauberger has taken an uneven path since she was nominated for the Sobeys Art Award in 2004. (I've never seen another work of hers to rival her teenage-girl rock-opera *A Memory Lasts Forever* from that same year.) *La mort e la miseria* is intentionally scrappy, and occasionally funny and curious for it, but, in its apparent skepticism about untainted cultural observation, is a bit easy. Thauberger leaves in the parts where her narrator is seen thrusting a script behind her back, for instance; and there is a muddled flatness at the tale's conclusion, common to folk tales, which may highlight Thauberger's and our own disconnect from the Ladin people.

Reed uses the flaws in her film to better effect, though she is working in a genre, fan fiction, known for its amateurishness. In *Twin Twin Peaks* she recruits a bunch of obsessive fans of Mark Frost and David Lynch's masterful TV series and gets them to write and shoot a new episode. The result is worth watching for anyone who's ever loved the show. Although poorly acted with awkward dialogue (things that, granted, *Twin Peaks* purposely exploited) the episode is notable for how much it stresses tone and pacing. In this sense, Reed goes beyond mere narrative obsession — the common way of seeing fan fiction — to present an investigation into the conceptual and formal qualities of the primary text. (Various photocopied handouts beside the video stress the importance, and accessibility, of *Twin Peaks* allusions, symbols and acting styles.) For Reed's fans, "realness" is, fascinatingly, as atmospheric as it is performative.

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