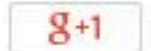
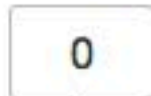




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Arts & Events

The Anti-Hollywood

Nov 13th 2013



Artist Eileen Cowin unveiled her video installation "It's So Good to See You," part of the Norton Museum of Art's new "L.A. Stories" exhibition, back in 1999, a year after "The Truman Show" was released. That movie's prescience in communicating our nascent obsession with reality stars and its evocation of a world, simulated or otherwise, under constant surveillance has made it a modern classic and even a real-life mental-health landmark.

The Truman Show Delusion has since been accepted by much of the psychiatric community to describe individuals who believe they are being secretly filmed in a reality series, and the faces captured in "It's So Good to See You" seem like prime candidates for such a diagnosis – self-actualizing prisoners in a post-"Truman" world. The installation features four old boxy televisions propped on industrial stands and VCRs each playing a different looped video shot by Cowin. The images are as commonplace and static as Andy Warhol's deliberately banal shorts: A man showers, a woman sleeps, a girl brushes her teeth, and a couple kisses. But the longer Cowin films, the more they seem to register their awareness of her camera – staring into it, through it and through us, perhaps. They begin as ciphers and gradually become our violated friends and neighbors. The more penetrating their stare, the more shameful we feel watching their private lives.

"It's So Good to See You" is the most compelling video piece in this small but illuminating exhibition, but why? What is it about these mundane images that so transfixes us? Is it just because they are televised, and we're programmed to treat them as entertainment? These are uncomfortable questions, and the artists in "L.A. Stories" leave it up to us to come up with the answers. While it's nice that a mainstream movie like "The Truman Show" broached topics like these, they find a snug and appropriate home in the context of an art museum, mostly conveying their messages in bursts of footage running no longer than 10 minutes.

Cowin's second piece in the exhibition, titled "Pants on Fire," uses the medium of video to right a personal four-decade-long wrong: The artist documents a phone call to her high-school art teacher in which she confesses that a drawing she had said was inspired by family portraits was instead a copy of Dorothea Lange's famous photograph, "Migrant Mother." Cowin's reasons for co-opting the photo, for lying about her drawing's provenance, and for admitting her indiscretion 40 years later are as enigmatic as "Migrant Mother" itself, but they speak to the transcendent allure of photography – the desire to escape into others' lives, which remains the appeal of many moving pictures since the invention of the Kinetoscope.



Other works in the exhibition cover wide thematic terrain. Julie Orser's "Double Bind" follows a perfect '50s housewife in her perfectly color-coded home – her apron even matches the yellow walls of her kitchen – whose life is a cycle of domestic drudgery. She becomes obsessed with another woman – perhaps her in another reality – who lives in a mysteriously monochrome universe as a femme fatale. Orser uses editing wipes to oscillate between these two lifetimes, offering a feminist appraisal of common female archetypes in cinema.

In his text accompanying the exhibition, curator Tim Wride mentions the influences of filmmakers Douglas Sirk and Alfred Hitchcock on Orser's work. Both are accurate – especially the latter's dark fever dream "Marnie" – but so are Chantal Akerman's domestic polemic "Jeanne Dielman" and David Lynch's dually existential "Mulholland Dr.," an L.A. story if there ever was one. "Double Bind" is an amazing piece of cinephilic referentiality that is seemingly without beginning and without end; join the loop at any time.

If "Double Bind" plays like an endless reel, Judy Fiskin's "The End of Photography" captures the end of reels altogether. The video shows ancient black-and-white footage of buildings and cityscapes, while Fiskin's voice-over catalogs the extinction of so many image-making accoutrements, one element at a time: film canisters, darkrooms, black-and-white negatives, and so forth. Even the footage Fiskin employed for this movie was originally shot on Super-8 film and had to be converted to digital video.

Of course, it's only natural; if we're going to watch and be watched 24/7, who has the time and ability to process film?

"L.A. Stories" runs through Jan. 12 at Norton Museum of Art, 1451 S. Olive Ave., West Palm Beach. Admission costs \$5-\$12. For information, call 561/832-5196 or visit norton.org.

Tags: norton museum of art, west palm beach, la stories, Video Art, eileen cowin, julie orser, judy fiskin