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Cult of Splendor

University Art Gallery
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A Conversation Between Victoria Fu and Max Maslansky January 2014

Max: When I watched *Belle Captive* the first time, I couldn't quite tell if it was staged or appropriated. It made me hark back to our time together at CalArts when you made this film of a wandering woman. I thought, she's dealing with similar issues in a lot of ways, this weird nether-land between digital and filmic space, between a precise setup and the spontaneous. It also seems like you overdubbed sound onto stock footage.



Victoria: Yes, it's all appropriated stock people, objects and sounds. I often think about how I'm making the same piece over and over again in different guises or materials. I'm not even sure which "wandering woman" film you're remembering— there was more than one during CalArts! It makes me wonder if the medium even matters—like, what would happen if you just gave me wooden sticks instead [laughs]? *Belle Captive* is the first time I used stock footage, and the idea for the piece came before the decision to use it (I had been considering shooting original footage). Looking back, stock makes perfect sense as material for these "nether-lands," as you say, being between advertising and cinema; their spaces are created to be materially erased in order to fit whatever context an advertiser might choose.

MM: That makes sense because your work has these interstitial spaces. In them, there are cues for wanting the subject or object to arrive somewhere, to develop like characters, but neither ever does. These new pieces are less narratively-driven, meaning there are different elements interspersed that don't seem quite related and aren't quite occupying the same spaces.

VF: That was the challenge and also the content. Each appropriated clip is like a flat cutout—flat in sensibility as well— on a fake background. I was trying to weave some sort of believable cinematic space with those disparate elements. They don't *completely* fuse into a singular space, and I am interested in that in-between state. I shot 16mm abstractions for the "background," then overlapped the stock footage over it as figures in the "foreground." I thought, if the space is just *sometimes* plausible and if I can *sometimes* believe that figure is in front of that sky, then what do I know about the space in between them? For me, that poses the existential questions that often drive me to make work. In cinema, we tend to flesh out the scene in our minds, even "feeling" the air in the space we can't see behind an on-screen object. But in *Belle Captive*, probing at that intermediary space leaves me with the bleak feeling of the virtual—yet there are moments when I can imagine the space as whole, just a different kind of flesh than cinema.

MM: I always liked the idea of *editing* space. I've been considering making the editing process more transparent in my paintings, rather than rendering ambiguous spaces that ultimately rely on illusion.

Typically, I make a drawing, project it, and then paint. That projection obviously disappears in the process and you'd never know it existed. But what would happen if I left my pencil notations in there, trying to make editing as real to the actual problem as I'm dealing with it in words (the inclusion of "ums," "uhs," ellipses, retractions, etc.)? I don't think painting is ultimately very good at covering the ground I want to cover. Maybe it's just going to be extrapolated over a long period of time through a series of multiple paintings. I feel like that's much easier to do with the moving image, collapsing five or six different images, sounds and sights. It's such a rich collusion of different sensory models. It's very hard to do that in a painting. Maybe the grass is always greener.

VF: And I admire the baggage of painting as an arena or a set of breakable rules—it's never without context. Sometimes, working with the moving image feels anchorless since it is everywhere in our lives. I have to partition the way I consume media: in the studio, as a spectator, a user of technology, etc. How do you go about indexing images for [your Facebook feed] "Redlight Lacuna" versus what you source for your paintings?

MM: For my feed, I'm more interested in the potentially offensive or perverse. Such images have more of an immediate shock value, giving me the impetus to find more like them. In such imagery for my painting, however, those truth-is-stranger-than-fiction moments are too easy. Even if you hate the painting, you'll be like, "Why is that horse dressed up like a leprechaun?" and you will remain at least amusingly confused. This is what I like about your work: you don't rely on something that is too exotic. The imagery you are using is really familiar, but I'm not sure where it comes from. I don't know if that's uncanny, but there are these in-between moments that are happening with the stock footage—an anchorman waiting to be on the air accompanied by vague chitter-chatter, for instance. Also, the English that is spoken is nonsensical: "a, b, q..."—it doesn't spell anything. It's like all the information has not been put together yet, but I recognize the structure of the *mise-en-scène* through a lifetime's worth of media exposure.

VF: The unresolved parts. Those breaks in language echo what stock images do to the overall narrative: the bones of a familiar filmic structure are there, but no one is home. We hear the alphabet, we see the hand emphatically gesturing, but none of the signs are connecting to meaning. Our images are stand-ins for the real things, but they are only glassy surfaces made of bits. There is something deeply empty about those broken links... we are projecting meaning onto a blank world.

MM: In that sense, your work is atmospheric and disjointed in a way that painting is pretty good at. And it deals with space the way a painting can too. Contemporary painting depicts deep space as a kind of outmoded technology that we buy into as an illusion, but whose flatness is still reinforced at the same time, all the time. I see that in the new work you're doing.

VF: *Three Breaths* is a recent 16mm film of mine that is blatantly like painting, speaking to the contradictions you mention regarding deep space and flatness—talk about outmoded technology! It depicts clouds of color forming and drifting in a landscape, and you realize it's airbrush paint buckling a piece of paper.

MM: You also have these partial elements—everything is fragmented. Narrative cinema never deals with subjects in this way.

VF: Yeah, it's usually, "Get the subject in the frame!" The colors I've been using in *Belle Captive* have exploded, maybe because I've been so monochromatic for a couple of years now...

MM: It's very bright and colorful and overblown too; everything is hyper-lit.

VF: I was thinking very consciously of classic prismatic Mac screensavers and also hyper-color California sunsets. I filmed sunlight filtered through prisms on a white wall, and also manipulated the 16mm negative's exposure, producing that mess of colors. It was a chance operation on top of a selective palette of produced color, a process not at all unlike painting.

MM: I'm a huge color nut, you know—

VF: Color nut—that's a good title for something.

MM: Yeah [*laughs*], that is good. I like super lush color. I feel like a lot of contemporary art confuses monochrome grayness, or color obstinance, with seriousness and smartness. My paintings are getting more and more consciously keyed-up. It's very intuitive, not preplanned, really. I know of painters who think of a color world: "I'm painting someone who's sick. What are the color of sick?" But because my subject matter is a little more open-ended, I just go.

Are you looking for sudden jolts of associative meaning when you layer these different elements that you find, or are they more based on formal decisions ("I just liked how that stack of papers looked occluding that woman's face")? Perhaps it's both at the same time. It's tricky to dissociate formalism from narrative content, if that's truly possible. Symbolically, I don't know what your paratactic associations *exactly* mean— they could be numerous—but they are certainly alluring. As a painter, I'm always looking to be constantly surprised— that's the drug of it—and if you're not getting that, you feel dead, your painting looks dead, it feels too procedural. Do you feel like you're looking for sudden surprise associations?

VF: Yes, I do want that jolt at times but I also want it to look *almost* normal. I was fragmenting, overlapping, manipulating the images like puzzle pieces being assembled to imply plausible space. The clip of a stack of office papers fit within the frame's perspectival space, and ended up covering a woman's face. In that video, I chose corporate-themed clips, whereas *Belle Captive I* includes coffee beans, orchids and dogs drinking water—partially chosen from my collection of stock clips for their spatial plausibility. If the space comes first as the organizing principle in my process, there will be surprising image combinations; if the images come first, the space becomes odd. I am shooting for a bit of both.

MM: You know the "uncanny valley" in CGI? If a digitally-created character doesn't look quite human enough, our brains can't process it and it's absolutely terrifying. "The Polar Express" tried to pass the uncanny valley, but couldn't. I remember everyone saying how creepy it was—"It's just like Tom Hanks, but not really! Get me out of here!" I look at your work and I think: this is a fake space, but I am willing to suspend my disbelief, and with relative comfort—it's a very subtle experience. On the other side of the spectrum, the show "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!" uses bad TV tropes and digital flourishes to the point of vomit: an onslaught of logos, kitsch-baroque with lots of idiotic plot scenarios, and the space is super ridiculous. I feel that a lot of contemporary art has been using this overabundance of signs in a compressed space to undermine the linearity of narrative— and each sign itself. Your gentler and more subtle approach adds up to a similar message, but through a different avenue: one that sinks with the horizon line of mass media, but just enough where you start to notice the falsity of what is taken for granted.

VF: It does amount to a kind of mutual destruction or canceling each other out—on top of already being so voided. These clips are made for the exchange of capital—nothing more, nothing less— and about selling anything, really. I sometimes think about their very "impoverished" existences, and I want to breathe into them, enrich them with some other life. Perhaps that's why I pace these films with something closer to cinematic time. They temporarily float, suspended and stretching just beyond a state of consumption.