



MIT List Visual Arts Center

Alix Pearlstein: The King, the Mice and the Cheese

October 12 – December 31, 2006

By Bill Arning
Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center

Alix Pearlstein: The King, the Mice and the Cheese is an exhibition of three works that were conceived separately yet function as a trilogy: *Forsaken* (2003), *Crash* (2004), *All Day and a Night* (2005).

The exhibition's title is derived from an influential 1965 children's book by Nancy and Eric Gurney in which a king's attempts to eliminate mice from his castle lead to even worse problems. The book has been seen as a strong commentary against abuses of power, which could also describe each of the three scenarios in Pearlstein's works.

Each video is composed of stylized vignettes with an ensemble of characters that perform complex and shifting psychological games. Pearlstein writes a narrative outline and full treatments of the character's histories, interpersonal relationships, affective memories, and motivations for each scene.

The artist forms ensembles of working actors for each work, including some well known in New York's theater community. The artificial form of a small group of diverse people trapped together in an ambiguous place is a classic trope of twentieth-century theater, such as Bruce Friedman's *Steambath* (1970) or Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921-25).

Pearlstein uses spare dialogue and abstract sets, locating the action in laboratory-like isolation, yet the psychology of each scene is clearly articulated to allow viewers to project their own relationships onto these strangers.

The situations resemble dubious therapeutic activities such as encounter groups or corporate teamwork exercises. Pearlstein conjures the darker side of group dynamics such as cult tactics used to break down a member's sense of individuality or the abuse inflicted during the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971.

Forsaken

In *Forsaken* a nebbishy man has gained power. As the work opens we see his cohorts sycophantically trying to be photographed with him, but the players also convey that they have begun to turn on him. A look of disgust passes perceptibly over the face of a stately older woman as she is brusquely removed after being photographed. We see him being fawned over by a woman who is too pretty to be interested in him except for his perceived power. A young man reacts violently to this but is quickly ejected, and the ruler is befuddled by his objections. They have all come to despise him, but he seems oblivious to clues of their imminent revolution. When the ruler's face is plastered on the wall the older woman revolts and the others follow her. She claims credit for starting the uprising and her bid to assume the vanquished ruler's mantle of power seems assured. This claustrophobic drama mixes ennui, despair, sublimated emotions, and startling explosions in a mode reminiscent of the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, an acknowledged inspiration for the artist.

Crash

Crash begins with a task of stacking foam bricks to make a simple structure. This type of competitive group activity is used to foster teamwork and also allow researchers to analyze and potentially improve group dynamics by observing who leads, who follows and who rebels. Pearlstein introduces one character that visibly stands apart from the group by wearing a pink camisole in marked contrast to the button-down business-like blue shirts worn by the others. Their outfits, while not out-of-ordinary, seem sinister when worn by all. She starts playing with the bricks and is immediately chastised by another woman, leading her to open rebellion and to knock down the structure the others have built. This brings a collective opprobrium from the group, and she is physically disciplined. After her re-education she appears to be the most dedicated brick stacker of the group. However, the seeds of rebellion she planted by misbehaving earlier have sprouted and the others now deliberately sabotage their collective task. This scenario brings to mind many depictions of the dangers of conformity and its susceptibility of being undermined by the slightest indication of free thought.

All Day and a Night

All Day and a Night has the most complex and abstract narrative in terms of the number of power reversals and interpersonal crisis depicted. An uncomfortably low ceiling, an observation window, and a kitschy painting of a Jesus-like face define the space. As in *Crash* clothing indicates the shifting allegiances of the players as all of the test subjects wear white underwear and the first experimenter wears a standard grey. Another man is stripped to his underwear and photographed before being isolated in the room, where he is aware that the window indicates that he is being observed. These are all methods of breaking prisoners' wills. In each of these uncomfortable scenarios our sympathies shift unpredictably as victims become co-conspirators. In the end they collaborate to dismantle the space, but even that they do in a spirit of experimentation, examining the shards.

About the Artist

Alix Pearlstein's one-person exhibitions include those at Salon 94 and the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, both in New York City; The Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Ithaca, NY, The Grossman Gallery of The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. Her work has been part of group exhibitions and screenings at SMAK Ghent, Belgium; The Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, Palm Beach, FL; The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Museum of Modern Art, in New York City. The artist was born, lives and works in New York City.

Public Programs

Thursday, October 12, 5:30 – 7:30 PM
Opening Reception

Saturday, November 4, 2:00 PM
Gallery Talk by artist Alix Pearlstein

The MIT List Visual Art Center's Exhibitions are generously supported by the Council for the Arts at MIT and the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

MIT List Visual Art Center
E 15, 20 Ames Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
617 253 4680
<http://web.mit.edu/lvac>

Bill Arning, Brochure Essay, *Alix Pearlstein: The King, the Mice and the Cheese*, MIT List Visual Arts Center, October 2006