

The New York Times

LAST CHANCE | ART REVIEW

An Attack on Foam Core And on the Status Quo

Alix Pearlstein: *After the Fall*, The Kitchen

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Published: October 16, 2008

Alix Pearlstein's videos and video installations have always tagged her as a rogue structuralist. She prefers to leaven the mechanics of performance art and the moving image with good-size doses of domestic life, down-to-earth humor and revealing emotion while implicating the viewer in it all through wildly active camera movement.

In her show of three new works at the Kitchen, Ms. Pearlstein appears to have taken off the gloves. Perhaps she has paid too much attention to 1970s precedents like the innovations of Michael Snow, [Yvonne Rainer](#) and [Richard Serra](#). Perhaps the social and political events of the day have made her mad as hell and unable to take it anymore. Her actors often conduct themselves with an animalistic force; the camera is either unflinchingly immobile or relentlessly on the move.

The result is a stripped-down, bare-knuckled starkness — not to mention an occasional obviousness — that is both a declaration of ambition and an attack on the status quo. For whatever reason, Ms. Pearlstein seems to have pulled the emotions and ideas in her art apart and is knocking their heads together.

In “After the Fall,” the four-channel video installation that is the centerpiece, the action unfolds on four large screens, one to a wall. It doesn't take long to figure out that a single scene has been shot by four cameras that either face one another in opposing pairs or circle the room — the very room in which we stand.

On the screens four men and four women are divided into two teams by their attire. One group tends toward black and gold and seems ready to go clubbing; the other favors identical tones of pink and red, like overgrown members of the Mickey Mouse Club.

The actors move back and forth between the center and the edges, taking part in different vignettes or just milling about, looking conspiratorially into the cameras. Their contact involves a bit of sex, a little violence (usually two couples pushing from opposite sides of a large white sheet of foam core), recurring ridicule and all-cast confabs in which they argue, gossip, vent or flirt.

We seldom understand a word they say, but the facts of existence are clear: competitiveness, betrayal, manipulation, occasional moments of intimacy. The general sense of moral shiftlessness is echoed in the literal disorientation caused by the revolving images and our attempts to watch events unfold from four different angles.

Life is no more pleasant in two single-channel pieces. In “One Side of Two Women 2” two disgruntled actresses in white walk back and forth, toward or away from a static camera, each one carrying a rectangle of white foam core that she holds in front of her face every time she stops to turn around. Three decades ago pretentious ideas about space, mirroring and repetition might have surrounded this piece; today it seems like a sarcastic meditation on the countless women who have figured in generations of avant-garde film and performance by men.

In “Goldrush” the camera moves in close as the group of eight returns, this time to tear apart a sheet of foam core and grab at the scraps. Something — cinema, art, a world — is being destroyed by senseless greed. Not too complicated, perhaps, but painfully familiar right now.

“Alix Pearlstein: After the Fall” continues through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 255-5793; thekitchen.org.

Past Coverage

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