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ART REVIEW

Fairy tales, video games, and hard labor in this artist's hallucinatory films

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated July 17, 2019, 5:18 p.m.



A scene from "Cinderella," part of "Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse" at MIT List Visual Arts Center. (PETER HARRIS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PHILIP MARTIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.)

Cinderella had a rough life until she was found by her prince. Things look even worse for her in Ericka Beckman's short 1986 film "Cinderella." She's a cog in an industrial machine, manning an enormous bellows in a doll factory. The heroine of Beckman's fairy tale is also the protagonist in a video game and a feminist repudiator of princely rescues. The artist masterfully layers it all into an adroit, if nightmarish, social critique.

"Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse," on view through July 28 at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, follows last year's "Introducing Tony Conrad: A Retrospective" there. Both exhibitions celebrate artists who fell between the cracks — visual artist or filmmaker? In recent years, as museums embraced film and video installation, Beckman and Conrad (who died in 2016) experienced career renaissances.

Beckman models her incantatory, hallucinogenic films on the ritualistic repetitions of games and hard labor. She draws on fairy tales and uses percussive, throbbing music. Woven together, these structures offer a desperate, frenzied model of life in a society driven by work, production, and the almighty dollar — a theme Henriette Huldish, director of exhibitions and curator, elucidates in this show.

The earliest film here, “You the Better,” was made in 1983 and, according to Huldish, booed at the New York Film Festival that year. Like “Cinderella,” it takes place in the dark, undefined space of early video games. These films have the same spare and clunky feel of that early technology — “Pong” come to life — brightened with some MTV-music-video-style song and dance.

“You the Better” marries video games with basketball and roulette. Players in blue jumpsuits aim a yellow ball at ghostly red and green house icons spinning past them. “Take a shot, put a house on a lot,” goes the soundtrack. This real estate game belongs in a lineage that begins with Monopoly and includes “The Apprentice.” The players taunt each other. A black-and-white house symbol appears to be in charge. As in a casino, ultimately nobody is going to beat the house.

Things don’t go much better for Cinderella, played by Gigi Kalweit who bears a striking resemblance to ’80s icon Brooke Shields. The familiar tale of gowns, balls, royal aspiration, and true love becomes a game: If Cinderella is still at the ball when midnight tolls, she gets a strike. After three strikes, she finds herself back sweating behind the bellows.

Positioning love and social climbing as a game, Beckman skewers notions of magical romance and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. In her view, we aren’t protagonists in our own life stories; we’re pieces on a game board at the mercy of larger forces.

But Cinderella does have an awakening. Seeing that her petticoat dress is a trap, she escapes it, and lets the prince go. He’s not after her, anyway, it turns out. “Green is the currency,” she sings. The prince might well be the industrialist automating her factory; he runs off with an assembly-line robot.

“You the Better” and “Cinderella” are at times arduous to watch, but their retro vibe and old technology do more than invoke nostalgia; they set up a cultural timeline that makes Beckman appear prescient. The other two films are more recent, with 21st-century production values.

“Switch Center,” made in 2003, looks at capitalist inclinations in post-Communist Hungary. Beckman filmed it in a water treatment facility in Budapest. Workers wearing blue jumpsuits like the ones in “You the Better” make a heroic dance of their labor. The unreal space of early video games is gone, and the artist takes advantage of the architecture, spiraling dizzily up the tower’s staircase.

As in “Cinderella,” new technologies intrude: A couple of Pokemon-type figures appear comically, perhaps displacing the workers. They frighten a woman walking through the building. She dashes up the stairs to the top and gazes out the tower window, a forlorn Rapunzel. Around her, industry is being demolished in the face of gentrification. More workers will lose their livelihoods.

“Tension Building,” Beckman’s 2016 film, fits our dark yet shiny and blusterous times. Again, she finds architecture to make a point. She filmed at three football stadiums, including at Harvard. Such arenas are metaphors for group identity, power clashes, and proverbial triumph. The artist cuts vertiginously from the cheering squad to teams at play to images of empty stands, which spin and multiply. A drumming soundtrack sets a breathless pace, blaring now and then with sounds of a marching band.

Beckman added an element to this film after the presidential election: A ghostly US Capitol floats over the field near the end. Perhaps capitalism’s overreach and the gamification of society and economics, which Beckman has highlighted since the start of her career, have culminated with the host of “The Apprentice” in the White House. Perhaps in time a sense of agency will be restored to working people.

I somehow doubt that’s Beckman’s view. But I cling to hope.

ERICKA BECKMAN: Double Reverse

At MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through July 28. 617-253-4680, listart.mit.edu/exhibitions/ericka-beckman

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