

In 'Double Reverse' At The MIT List, Ericka Beckman Focuses Her Lens On The Game

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A still from Ericka Beckman's "Tension Building," 2016. (Courtesy of the artist)

In Ericka Beckman's video "Tension Building," we hear the rat-a-tat-tat of a marching drum as the camera pans briskly around stadium seats. Every so often, the camera hits an obstacle, and each time it does, we hear video-game sound effects — bells, boings, cartoon thuds. As the camera's pace quickens, we find ourselves thrust into game day action — football players do jumping jacks, cheerleaders pump their pom-poms, a marching band plays, spectators clap.

Our hearts beat a little faster, just as they would on a football field, at a video game arcade or standing before a casino roulette wheel. The adrenaline rush is familiar, but it's different too. The staccato, stop-motion shots, the repetition, the percussive soundtrack,

all heighten a sense of speed and anxiety, while also hinting at darker forces fueling our fascination with games. There's something reflexive going on here. Football, video games, gambling — these are the bread and circuses that appease and hypnotize the masses, keeping our society marching along with military precision.

In "[Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse](#)," on view beginning Friday at the MIT List Center for the Visual Arts, Beckman explores connections between games and gambling, the larger structures of capital, as well as the gamification of a culture which has given itself over to scores, challenges, tokens and rewards as a means of control. (How many "likes" did your tweet get today? And more importantly, did you get your 10,000 steps in?)

The installation is a survey — the first in the U.S. — of this particular combination of four Beckman videos made between 1983 and 2016. They feature Beckman's characteristic style of bright primary colors set against dark, ambiguous back drops, often employing archetypal and storybook characters. She deftly interweaves filmed images and animation and dispenses with the traditional narrative structure, opting instead, for the structure of the game. The videos are surrounded by props and artifacts that reference some of the images in the films, including stadium bleachers.

For Beckman, a professor in the Department of Film and Video at MassArt, the game structure allows for a full-immersion, interactive experience while making a broader point.

"I'm interested in how to change behaviors or set ideas or set norms," she says. "And I've found that if I use a game, it encourages people to play with those ideas, to think about them in a playful way and possibly untangle the associations with those ideas and reformulate them."

The nine-minute "Tension Building" was created in 2016 and is one of Beckman's more recent works. Combining stop motion and live action filmmaking, it was shot at the Harvard Stadium in Boston and the Municipal Stadium in Florence, Italy. (Boston Symphony Orchestra percussionist Richard Flanagan provided the music, along with the

UMass Minuteman Marching Band.)



A still from Ericka Beckman's "Tension Building." (Courtesy of the artist and Iris Ranzinger)

According to Beckman, though the motif, as always, was that of the game, the film was actually inspired by her ongoing interest in architecture, particularly after visiting European stadiums and old plants and factories in Eastern Europe.

“It was really an exercise in trying to figure out how to work with architecture and animate architecture. I was using the camera like a surveyor would use their scope, except instead of defining coordinates in space I would actually move around those coordinates in space. Having done a few experiments and looking at the animation, I realized that there's a lot more that's going on in stadium architecture than what meets the eye.”

The pageantry of stadium architecture, the display of it all, was a characteristic she connected to politics, which explains one scene in “Tension Building” in which an animated image of a capital building appears over the stadium.

Though “Tension Building” may be the most recent video in “Double Reverse,” it mirrors an idea that permeates all of Beckman’s work: We’re all caught up in larger

societal forces, cogs in a “machine” that determine, whether we are aware of it or not, our behavior.

And so, it seems appropriate that in “Switch Center,” created in 2003 in an abandoned water purification plant in Hungary, we see workers scurrying to turn cranks and flip switches to keep the machine in motion. It is highly repetitive and somewhat hypnotic, until the rhythm is interrupted by the unexpected appearance of what appears to be Pokémon gods. By the end, at least one worker seems to momentarily escape her Switch Center life. Beckman says she was inspired by the Dadaist post-Cubist art film “Ballet Mécanique” made in 1924 by painter and sculptor Fernand Léger. As with “Tension Building,” the architecture also played a key role.



A still from Ericka Beckman's "Switch Center," 2003. (Courtesy of the artist)

“When I began preparing the film in Budapest in 2000, I found myself surrounded by the remnants of the Soviet’s Modernist Architecture,” Beckman explains on her website. “I was immediately captivated by these buildings — not because they were esthetically appealing — but because they embodied perfectly, not only their purpose, but also the ideology upon which they were built. They were not constructed to last but a few years, but rather to endure through millennia, corresponding to the expected lifespan of the regime... I wanted to make a tribute to the kind of futuristic pragmatism expressed by

these buildings that are now being razed to allow space for shopping malls and corporate offices.”

While she was shooting, her work was interrupted by a crew filming a Pokémon commercial at the plant, which explains the arrival of the Pokémon figures in her video. More than other films she has made, this one was close to a documentary, she says.

Two other videos in “Double Reverse” pick-up more directly on the game motif. “Cinderella,” (1986) is a 28-minute-long retelling of the Cinderella story through a pinball lens. This time, Cinderella works in a forge, trying to break out of her dismal existence by attending a ball to find her Prince Charming. But when she fails to get back to the forge by midnight, she loses her prize and is swept back to her starting point to try all over again. We watch as she is ping-ponged back and forth, determined to win this game to break free.

“I was intending to take apart the pressures that a young girl faces when trying to establish a positive sense of identity and self-worth,” says Beckman. “The pressure upon the young girl was enacted by the game structure itself, and she learned to simply avoid it. In doing so, through the process of not succeeding and learning what she isn't in the game, she finds a voice and also finds her relationship to the game itself. She proves that she doesn't need it at all for her identity.”



A still from Ericka Beckman's "Cinderella," 1986. (Courtesy of the artist)

In “You the Better,” a film that caused a ruckus when it first debuted at the New York Film Festival in 1983, Beckman examines games of chance and gambling. Artist Ashley Bickerton performs the mechanics of the game servicing an off-camera betting entity known as the “House.” Yes, the game keeps changing and players are swapped out, but one thing remains the same: “the ‘House’ is hidden and controls the bets, the ‘chance’ of winning is nil. The game, in fact, is not between the players, but rather between the ‘House’, and the ‘Bettor.’ ”

Beckman says she was inspired after seeing a Jai Alai game in Mexico, in which wealthy businessmen bet on indigenous players who played a violent game down on the field. She found it all disturbing, but more striking was the two contradictory belief systems she saw at play. One was the belief that you can “win” if you’re fast, strong and prepared. The other belief was in pure luck and chance. Gambling, she says, is what held these two contradictory beliefs together.

“Every time I make a film it's usually about something that really upsets me,” she says. “And so, the film itself is a way to work out those issues and turn them around.”

In keeping with the game theme, the title of the exhibit, “Double Reverse” refers to a football play in which a ball carrier moves a football back across the field before handing off to a teammate running the in opposite direction.

Maybe we’re all experiencing the same little trick, but the question Beckman seems to ask, is who has the ball and which team is winning?

["Ericka Beckman: Double Reverse"](#) is on view at the MIT List Center for the Visual Arts from May 24 through July 28.