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ART REVIEW; Family Tensions and Joy,
Played but Not Spoken



Alix Pearlstein/Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

A detail from a video frame of Alix Pearlstein's 10-minute "Episode".

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At least by today's accelerated standards, the video artist Alix Pearlstein has taken her time maturing. Having exhibited in New York since 1988, she began as a sculptor, took up video in 1992, and has seven solo shows to her credit. But her work, while coherent, distinctive and entertaining, has usually left me waiting for more, and better. The centerpiece of her solo No. 8, Ms. Pearlstein's first show at Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, delivers just that: more, and better.

"Episode," a 10-minute video installation using two wall projections, focuses on some of the basic tensions and joys of family life. Ms. Pearlstein's most ambitious and accomplished work to date, it treats human interaction with a resonance, subtlety and emotional depth that previously didn't seem a part of her game plan. Its opposing projections, filling the short walls of a longish gallery, activate real space, and the viewer within it, with post-minimalist flair.

Although the installation makes good on many elements that have long been part of Ms. Pearlstein's approach, it was never clear that she was even headed in the general direction of "Episode." Since turning from sculpture to video, this artist has brought something of a miniaturist's perfectionism to the early-1970's home-alone, me-and-my-Camcorder tradition associated with video pioneers like William Wegman, Bruce Nauman and Joan Jonas.

Working in front of seamless white paper that adds crisp outlines and a commercial-art note, Ms. Pearlstein extended this tradition with a distinctive combination of finish and casualness. She was aided by an innate understanding of video's implicit quirks, protocols, intimacy and illusionistic possibilities.

Ms. Pearlstein either starred in those videos -- maintaining her poise whether mimicking an Ingres odalisque or wearing a bunny suit -- or directed friends, performance artists and professional actors with the firm discreetness of a puppeteer. When her props exceeded what she had around the house or could make, she turned to magazines, cutting out pictures of street signs, dogs and even people, and working them into the tape, adding an endearing suggestion of collage.

The results were often wry greeting-card moments of emotional connection between people, torqued by visual puns, word-play pantomime, art references and perfectly timed sound effects. They had a familial sweetness and an urbane sense of economy, but they were often not quite funny enough -- more "Sesame Street" than New Yorker cartoon. Until recently, all this suggested a very smart creative director, alert to the latest art tics, playing around in a magazine's photo studio on a Saturday. Or perhaps a hyper-organized gardener cultivating a small plot of land -- bonsai video.

In the last two years, it seems, something began to change. Ms. Pearlstein's people started appearing naked, interacting with the collaged images of other naked people; her camera assumed a state of constant motion and inconstant focus, becoming a kind of participant in the action, as has happened in current sitcoms. Her recent videos, even shorter than usual, had a dreamlike wooziness, not exactly charged but inflected with sexual longing.

"Episode" taps into those feelings -- in diffused and complicated form -- as the basic undercurrent of family life, powering the interactions of an average family's requisite four members, all superbly played by adult actors who run around barefoot in their at-home clothes. David Mazzeo plays the father, Catherine Curtin the mother. Emily Unterweger plays the daughter. As the son, James Urbaniak, who has worked with Ms. Pearlstein before, adds a scrawniness and rubbery face worthy of George Booth.

"Episode" consists of many short episodes and interactions. It's like a little play about family life, only pantomimed, with the cast's actions and feelings intermittently amplified or exaggerated by sound effects. Loose-limbed, sometimes to the point of seeming like rag dolls, the family members rush about with an improvisational energy, careering off camera and back on, making contact, pulling back, showing tenderness or rage. Life moves fast, and so does the camera, following them, coming close, then moving away, often at similarly careering tilts and angles.

Walking into the gallery can feel like stepping into someone's dance piece or into one of Richard Bellingham's photographs of his dysfunctional family, here scrubbed clean and brought to life. The double images, which you can't see simultaneously, are disorienting and continue a long tradition of split-vision video art and sculpture, dating back at least to Richard Serra's early work.

The device is especially important in video right now because it is one way moving images can physically involve the viewer, and this involvement is the main characteristic that separates video from the movies, and galleries containing video artworks from movie theaters.

Ms. Pearlstein's version is especially acrobatic. Her actors tumble about continuously, pursued by the camera, which is in the expert

hands of the artist and Amy Epstein. In particular, she makes the viewer an extension of the camera, which is already functioning like a nosy neighbor, a referee or an extra relative in the unfolding events.

One quibble is that the interactions are a little too predictable: the father's excessive attention to the daughter, the mother's attempt to keep up with her son's taste in music, the kids' fighting and teasing and sometimes violent outbursts, the parents' little dance of antagonism and attraction. But there are moments of real tension, as when the father circles the three others in a classic display of paternal fury and then juts his face into the camera's lens. And there are comedic interludes, as when the son mimics his father preening ever so slightly before the mirror.

Admittedly, this family is exceptionally average -- straight, white and given to gender stereotype -- but the relationships and constantly shifting balances of power are beyond familiar. They are in our bones; just fill in the appropriate names and faces.

Ms. Pearlstein is also operating with her usual economy and precision, simply asking us, as before, to watch what her characters are doing. What they are doing is communicating extremely complicated situations without uttering a word, although the sound effects, sharp as ever, help. It is impressive to watch them achieve this with so little apparent effort, just as it is meaningful to grasp the finer nuances of feeling that emerge with repeated viewing.

Once you figure out that the two projections are not quite identical, and that Ms. Pearlstein hasn't wasted a second, a gesture or a glance, you may find yourself turning your head back and forth in rapid tennis-match style, or rotating in space to make sure you're not missing any bit of them. While the action remains pretty much the same on both walls, the details of expression and gesture don't.

As in life itself, the feelings keep changing, amplifying and elaborating on one another, weaving the ever-present web that is, in the words of the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, where we start from.

"Alix Pearlstein: Episode" remains at the Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, 730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street, (212) 445-0444, through Oct. 5.

