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Pearlstein plays with perception in video works

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 19, 2014

LINCOLN — There's much that's familiar in Alix Pearlstein's video installation "The Park," on view at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Pearlstein filmed it at the sculpture park. Sol LeWitt's spiraling "Tower (DC)," made of concrete blocks, is a pivot point. People lounge on the grass, chatting.



DAN BOARDMAN

A production still from Alix Pearlstein's "The Park," in which she filmed five actors at deCordova Sculpture Park.

Yet it's also oddly precise and formal. The people are local actors (among them Paula McGonagle, Omar Robinson, and John Kuntz). Pearlstein minutely choreographs their movements. At one point, three actors position themselves on the grass in an echo of Manet's "Le déjeuner sur l'herbe." Like the nude at that picnic, all of the actors then turn and gaze directly out at us. Yikes — have we been caught intruding?

Pearlstein's videos tie together practices from minimalist art, structuralist films, and postmodern dance. Earlier pieces were carefully constructed, with nebulous story lines. Lately, the story has

dropped out, and what we have left is the relationships among the actors, the camera, the viewer, and the backdrop. With no narrative, those connections can be surprisingly electric.

“The Park,” a three-channel video projected on three walls in the deCordova’s Dewey Family Gallery, is only the second project in which Pearlstein has introduced the landscape. Usually she works in a bare white studio, a setting that emphasizes every gesture, every expression. Her “MONØGRAM” video, now in an exhibition at Samsøñ, was made in a cyclorama — a round white backdrop with no corners, no edges.



Pearlstein’s “Untitled (after MONØGRAM)” features three actors dressed in black against a white backdrop.

There are only three actors in “MONØGRAM,” dressed in black. Pearlstein has provided a script, which describes every movement, every exit and entrance, every zoom. It reads like a set of Sol LeWitt instructions for a wall drawing or a sculpture: dry, precise, occasionally open-ended. For LeWitt, the instructions were as much the art as the object was. I’m not sure that’s true for Pearlstein, but they provide an enlightening glimpse into her process.

The camera zooms out, and the actors enter in different permutations. The camera zooms in, and they exit. They maintain chillingly neutral expressions. Sometimes, one sits, or two hold hands. They gaze at the camera, right out at the viewer. Sitting in the darkened gallery, I didn’t know whether they were mine to gaze at, or I was theirs.

The actors — a black woman, a white woman, a white man — assemble in tableaux into which we can read indications of status and relationship. They sit or stand; they hold hands, they make cool eye contact. They change costumes, dressing up, dressing down. I found myself, at times, feeling especially confronted by the white woman, and I don’t know if that’s because the actress conveyed something hostile or fraught, or simply because she was the most like me.

Bringing landscape into the equation, as Pearlstein does in “The Park,” changes everything. The relationships among the five actors are less freighted; the choreography is less provocatively about power, and more about utilizing the sculpture park, with its echoes of Manet’s picnic and expectations of a certain kind of socializing.

That’s what the deCordova’s Platform series aims to do: create art that engages directly with what the museum has to offer. Different sculptures appear in the background, reflecting formal tensions — John Wilson’s giant bust “Eternal Presence”; Fletcher Benton’s rusty geometric abstraction “Donut With 3 Balls”; and William Tucker’s more fluid bronze abstraction “Chinese Horse.”

In the gallery, the video installation surrounds us on three sides, mimicking the lush experience of the park. We are outside, yet inside. Immersed in nature, enclosed in a dark gallery. A bucolic soundtrack of crickets chirping and birds singing drowns out mumbled conversations between actors.

If anything has power here, it’s the camera. On all three screens, it slowly, ineluctably zooms in, cutting actors from the frame, reorienting focus, in a reference to Michael Snow’s camerawork in the 1967 film “Wavelength.” The zooming underlines the punch of a singularly directed gaze. It is as penetrating as the look Manet’s nude flashes in our direction, shocking and shaking up 19th-century viewers, or the hungry, acquisitive gaze of the gallery goer. But it moves, restless and intense. Pearlstein takes us along for the ride.

The video loop runs for close to four minutes, during which time the actors, dressed in blue and black, move about with the same neutrality as those in “MONØGRAM,” sometimes interacting, always understated. At the end, they all turn directly to the camera. Always, there’s a seated woman with one arm resting on her knee, like Manet’s nude. And always, it feels as if we’ve stumbled into a private conversation, and we’re not welcome. Again, the art stares down the viewer.

We do so love to look. As viewers, we can forget that we are not invisible. Pearlstein’s videos set us toppling into the gap between subject and object. It’s an uneasy place to be.

More information:

ALIX PEARLSTEIN: MONØGRAM

At: Samsøñ, 450 Harrison Ave., through July 26.

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