



Review: At Contemporary, video artist Alix Pearlstein leaves the ordinary for “The Dark Pavement”

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A scene from Alix Pearlstein's "The Dark Pavement (The Window)."

New York-based video artist Alix Pearlstein’s exhibit [“The Dark Pavement.”](#) at the [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center](#) through March 16, consists of four looped videos — three projected and one on a flat-screen monitor — all filmed at the center using a diverse group of local actors in a series of still tableaux or, as in the largest projection, in wordless, choreographed movement.

In the “still” videos, the arrangement of actors in the Contemporary’s little-used cellar, parking lot or planted pavilion often resembles something out of Renaissance allegorical painting. In night scenes or the cellar, blotchy pixellation

even suggests painterly brushstrokes. With a lovely, radiating sense of quiet, the self-conscious, aesthetic arrangements suggest an elusive meaning.

Stillness predominates so much that the eye is ineluctably drawn to minute changes: wind-trembled leaves or hair, the smallest readjustment of the body, fleeting movement of the eyes, a tiny change in the face. Expressions are neutral, though such endless, motionless neutrality cumulatively begins to seem somehow spiky, defensive, even vaguely provocative. The medium of video is designed, after all, to capture a subject's movement and speech, yet here the subjects remain defiantly, unassailably motionless and silent.

The largest projection, on the other hand, is distinct in its ceaseless motion, its refusal to stop *anywhere*. It is set indoors in front of a strange window at the Contemporary, which looks out onto a stairway and embankment and is partly buried by them. The actors walk back and forth, sit, stop, stand, move toward one another and away, with a studied sort of randomness, momentarily suggestive of tiny dramas that never quite play out due to the unending change.

The camera itself becomes part of the choreography, moving back and forth at various speeds and stopping at different destinations. Everyday movements form strange, unpredictable, indecipherable patterns; the shifts may suggest relationships and purpose, but they never specify them.



A scene from "The Dark Pavement (Parking Lot)."

Pearlstein most often uses professional actors in her videos. (Some, such as 2010's "Talent," deal more directly with the profession as subject matter.) As a frequent theater-goer in Atlanta, I recognized many of the actors in the videos, so some dichotomies about the theater inevitably came to mind. Is this "on stage" or somehow behind the scenes? Is this "in character" or "out of character"? In some ways, actors are stand-ins for real people; they study us so they can imitate and reproduce us on stage, but are they "themselves" here? Still stand-ins for others? For the viewer? The most infamous actorly question was unspoken in these videos but came to mind nonetheless, carrying a funny new existential resonance: "what's my motivation?"

Pearlstein has rarely filmed outdoors — she typically works in a studio or other very controlled indoor environment — and the new work represents something of a journey into new territory. The way the four videos are arranged, we seemingly begin in the sequestered space of the cellar, move on to the gallery in the second video (there's a clear fascination with that strange window), then we're outside that same window (a lone actress sits on the stairs tentatively, anxiously, gazing back inside), before we end up in the more challengingly expansive outdoor settings in the final video.

The title "The Dark Pavement" derives from a phrase in a description by architect, art theorist and sculptor Tony Smith about driving on the newly built New Jersey Turnpike, then not yet opened:

"It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights.

"This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. It did something for me that art has never done. It seemed that there was a reality there which had not had any expression in art."

Perhaps finding the territory where there are no guideposts, lights or shoulder markers — for herself, for her subjects, for her viewers, in reality, in her art — is something of a motivating force in Pearlstein's work. Such encounters with "dark pavement" can disrupt ordinary habits of viewing, and the fault lines are fascinating territory to delve into.

There was a creepy moment of dark pavement when I was in the gallery alone. All at once, I realized that my own movements around the gallery — back and forth between the videos, up close to get a better look, then backing away to get the larger picture — perfectly mirrored the movements of the actors, the same movements that had seemed so foreign and inexplicable to me a moment before, the same ones that had been performed in the space I now occupied. I had passed into the light of a projector and a piece of the video's image was on my hand and notebook.

It was an odd, dreamlike sensation: admiring a painting in a museum, you suddenly realize you're standing in the same pose as the subject and your hands are wet with the paint. The mythic and the ordinary, the subject and viewer, the real and depicted strangely blur. Well, it's hard to explain, but let's just say the drive can be a revealing experience.