

Art Conversation

By Peter H. Duhon Jr.

Sue de Beer, Nightmares in Tow, Comes Home

Sue de Beer isn't reluctant to explore artistic subject matter that most would deem repugnant—adolescent suicide, high-school shootings, a repulsive birth—yet this approach has yielded her more than 50 exhibitions internationally. Her videos and installations have been likened to David Lynch films, Edward Kienholz's creepy found-object sculptures and, in one *New York Times* review, to "an after-school special from hell." At age 37, she has both baffled her critics and landed her work in the collections of MoMA, the Whitney and the New Museum.

Now transplanted from Berlin to Brooklyn, the artist will have her biggest U.S. exhibition yet, opening Feb. 3, when her video about a hypnotist who controls a money manager is screened in the period rooms of the Park Avenue Armory. She is currently at work on a new show slated for March at the Marianne Boesky gallery.

The Observer sat down with Ms. de Beer to explore her peculiarly American brand of gothic.

Tell us about the project at the Park Avenue Armory.

The Ghosts is primarily an exhibition of a new film, although there will be sculptural pieces. I started *The Ghosts* saying I wanted to make a *giallo* (Italian crime and horror film), but it isn't really a *giallo* now.

And the Boesky exhibition?

It is called "depiction of a star obscured by another figure." It is about eclipses, which in a way *Ghosts* is also about—one body eclipsing another. We're building an 8-foot drop ceiling in the gallery painted gold. It is the first time I will have an exhibition without video as a primary focus; it will also have a sculpture based on an early animation machine from the turn of the last century. Shamin Momin is curating a show in Marfa, Texas, and she asked me to turn a building into a sculpture.

You were born in Tarrytown, raised in Boston, went to Parsons and Columbia. How is your background a part of your work?

New England aesthetics has had a strong influence on my work. Especially painters like John Singer Sargeant. I was raised in Salem and very close to Salem. The 17th-century architecture which has this Louise Nevelson quality to it.

It's been said that you are a "true American" artist? What do you think about that statement?

I didn't really consider myself to be an American artist until I was exhibiting in Europe. Then I really understood how American or how my worldview was American.

What are some qualities of this Americana?

Optimism and humor mixed in with seriousness. Although my work can be



From *The Ghosts*.

quite dark, I have a sympathy for the characters.

You often work with teenage actors. Why?

Teenagers have a vulnerability and an electricity about them.

What directors and films have inspired you?

Lynch and Kubrick, there are so many. Fassbinder's *An American Soldier*. Syberberg's *Hitler*, Lars von Trier. *Hausu*, an incredible Japanese psychedelic horror film. Frank Casdorf, Christoph Schlingensiefel and the Volksbühne. Oh, I forgot to mention Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace*.

You started winning awards about a decade ago. Did it change your life, your work?

I was able to make work without having a job. It moved me to Europe; at that point I had been traveling to Europe but never had a chance to live there.

When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

I don't know. I was expelled from high school, which was very positive for me. I decided to become an artist after that; it felt like a good decision. I didn't have many other options anyway.

Now you teach at N.Y.U. Is it a good time for young artists right now?

I think it is, but I think it is a very difficult time for young people in general. I'm shocked at the lack of decent paying jobs, considering the size of student loans.

Would you recommend Berlin to artists?

Yes, but you have to be economically independent to do it. It is difficult to be an outlander and find work, so you have to be making money off of your work. Berlin is filled with history and there is something haunting and uncanny about it. The city enters into your blood, very strange, and it gives you very vivid dreams.