

Arts & LEISURE

The New York Times

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2011

Sue de Beer in her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Her new video has its debut on Thursday.



RICHARD PERRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

White Paint, Chocolate, And Postmodern Ghosts

By RANDY KENNEDY

SURVEYING the row of door buzzers outside the hulking Brooklyn building where the artist Sue de Beer works, it somehow seems fitting to find a lone occupant listed on the building's top floor, with no further explanation: "GOD."

"I don't know who that is or what they do," Ms. de Beer said, breaking into a laugh when a reporter pointed out the small handwritten label next to the buzzer. "I've never really been up to that floor."

But given the nature of her work and especially her most recent creation — a lush, frankly mystical video piece called "The Ghosts" that will have its debut Thursday in an unlikely place, one of the stately period rooms at the Park Avenue Armory — it is tempting to imagine the Holy Ghost himself at work up there in an old warehouse on the Red Hook flatlands, not far from a dingy bus depot, an Ikea and a

discount store called 99 Cent Dreams.

Over the last decade Ms. de Beer has built a cult following for the dark and often disturbing ways that she mixes the profane and the sacred — or at least a postmodern version of the sacred, a longing to escape the confines of ordinary consciousness for something perhaps more beautiful or true.

The exhibition at the Armory and a show of related sculpture to open Feb. 18 at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea are the most prominent presentation of Ms. de Beer's work in the United States since she first became known through her inclusion in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and entered many prominent public collections, like those of the Museum of Modern Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

In the work for which she is best known, videos that

Continued on Page 20

ART

White Paint, Chocolate and Specters

From Page 1

have mined the underbelly of youth culture — a critic once described her as “the pre-eminent auteur of teen angst” — the supernatural, or at least supernormal, has never been quite so front and center as it is in “The Ghosts,” which Ms. de Beer describes as a turning point, three years in the making.

But it has never been far outside the frame. The adolescent bedrooms that so often serve as the centerpieces of her creations, cluttered with posters and guitars and packs of cigarettes, have seemed at times like existential anterooms, where the occupants await some kind of apothecosis with the help of love or drugs or other mechanisms for escape.

Like, for instance, the sensory deprivation tank in which Ms. de Beer spent many dark, quiet hours when she lived in Berlin, with a pyramid above it for energy-channeling. (“It was kind of hokey,” she said.) Or the hypnotists she began to visit there and in New York, who informed the creation of the central character in “The Ghosts,” a hollow-cheeked hypnotist convincingly played by a fellow artist, Jutta Koether, a painter and musician.

“What I wanted was some kind of non-verbal, non-narrative experience outside myself, something like a state of total belief without having to articulate a belief system,” Ms. de Beer, 37, said in a recent interview in her studio, where she shot much of the new video in small rooms with the windows blacked out. “But I don’t know if I ever got there.”

The new 30-minute two-screen video grew out of a period of desperation in her life, after a year in which she made no art at all. At that time, in 2007, she was traveling almost nonstop, mostly between Berlin, where she lived for several years, and New York, where she is now an assistant professor at New York University.

“I was burned out to the point where I just couldn’t do anything creative, and so I actually kind of gave up, and it was liberating,” said Ms. de Beer, who, despite the Stygian nature of her fascinations, is engaging and open in person, exuding a kind of rock-geek cool.

In the winter of her bad year, the sun would set in Berlin before 4 in the afternoon, she said. She started venturing out only at night, riding the U-Bahn subway trains alone with a notebook, trying to write. Then for two months she locked herself in a room with only a desk, a chair and a blanket, rarely coming out.

When she did, she had written the basic script for “The Ghosts,” which follows three characters — a young woman, a record-store clerk and a moose manager (played by Jon Spencer, singer and guitarist for the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, whom Ms. de Beer persuaded to act for the first time) — as they seek the help of the hypnotist to deal with loss and longing.

In doing so, they conjure up ghosts — frightening-looking ones, who owe a visual debt to Ms. de Beer’s long fascination with horror films and, lately, to the particularly bloody 1970s Italian subgenre known as giallo. The ghosts seem to be challenging the viewer to decide whether they are mere memories or phantasms of a more substantial sort — or whether, in the end, it really matters.

In her early years Ms. de Beer was often identified among the practitioners of a death-haunted, neo-Gothic strain of contemporary art that emerged after 9/11, a list that included Banksy, Violette and David Laundy. But the new work, while playing with those expectations, owes a lot more to Proust than to Poe, as a wrenching examination of memory and the ways it shapes identity.

“I think that over the last several years she’s developed a signature style and voice that’s all her own,” said Lauren Ross, the curator and director of arts programs for the High Line and a former chief curator at White Columns, who has followed Ms. de Beer’s work. “It’s always seemed to me that she is after a certain kind of character, one constantly in danger of losing control of the self. I think she’s very interested in how thin that line is.”

She added: “I’ve always found her work to be extremely unsettling. It’s always taken me out of my comfort zone.”

Doreen Remen, one of the founders of the Art Production Fund, the nonprofit organization that is bringing the video to the Armory with the help of Sotheby’s, the



A Sue de Beer sculpture, “Depiction of a Star Obscured by Another Figure” (2011), painted plywood and steel, on display in her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn.



Scenes from “The Ghosts”: top, Claire Buckingham; left, Jon Spencer; and right, Chris James and Claire Buckingham.

event’s sponsor, said the fund was interested in helping stage a video project in New York partly because “video has the ability to bridge a kind of audience gap that exists in contemporary art.”

“And,” she added, “I think that with this work, Sue is playing more with the conventions of movie entertainment in a way that is going to grab people, even though it’s not a conventional movie by any means.”

‘The Ghosts’ was conceived and written during a long, bleak winter in Berlin when the artist worked in self-enforced solitude.

Because of great difficulty finding production money for the video in 2008 as the economy plunged, Ms. de Beer’s ghosts were whipped up mostly on the cheap, using naked actresses spray-painted white, head to toe, and chocolate sauce for the blood that oozes from the mouth of one of them, all of it transformed later in the editing room, where she spent months shaping two terabyte hard drives full of footage.

“I was doing all this research on how to make a ghost on essentially a two-dollar budget without making it look just laughably hilarious,” she said.



Her sets, which have always worn their high-school-play artifice proudly, in this case really needed to do so because of budget concerns. A few helpers built a late ’70s Trans Am from wood — complete with the phoenix hood decal known in its day as the screaming chicken — spending little money except on a certain smokeable substance to make the experience more enjoyable. The only real splurge, Ms. de Beer said, was hiring a cat trainer and a large white Persian cat named Snoobell, indulging a visual fascination she finds hard to explain. (Snoobell also appeared in a 2009 video.)

Ms. de Beer met Mr. Spencer through the members of a German band called the Cobra Killers. He said he became involved partly because she described the project as a horror film and he is a fan of the genre. But during the shooting, which he squeezed into an exhausting Australian tour schedule, he was unsure at times what he had gotten himself into.

“Things were always a little vague, even sometimes the address where I was supposed to show up,” he said. “I don’t know if she was doing this to increase my sense of disorientation, to keep me in the dark. But I guess if she was, in some ways it kind of worked. It was a strange experience all around.”

Ms. de Beer, who doesn’t like to use trained actors in her works, said she was drawn to Mr. Spencer mostly because of his weathered voice and “world-weary face” and was pleased with the character he helped bring to life, a businessman who seems to be trying to exorcise a lost love by summoning her from the dead only so that he can leave her, repaying her for abandoning him. (The dreamlike dialogue in the video was written by Alissa Bennett, who has collaborated with Ms. de Beer be-

fore, and by Ms. Koether.)

Ms. de Beer said during the interview in her studio one blustery afternoon that the video was “really very personal for me, partly because I had benched myself.”

“When I finished with the initial script, it felt very important to me to make it,” she said.

Growing up in a rambling Victorian house with a widow’s walk in Salem, Mass., which still exudes an air of its witchy past, she felt that mysticism was a kind of birthright, and it has been a more prominent element of her work in recent years. A 2006 video, “The Quickening,” set in a cartoonish Puritan New England, delved into the spiritual seeking of the French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans and quoted from the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” putting the Jonathan Edwards warhorse to work in probably the strangest context it has ever found itself. Ms. de Beer has also borrowed from the dark, violent post-religious mysticism of the novelist Dennis Cooper. (From his novel “Period,” used in a 2005 de Beer video: “I could open the other dimension right now if I wanted. Or I could stay here with you. I’m kind of like a god.”)

But Ms. de Beer said that her fascination with ghosts is in one sense simply about finding a way to explore how we all must deal with the past and with loss as we grow older, a struggle that finds a metaphor in the artistic process itself.

“As an artist, you shed all these objects which were the ‘you’ back in the moment when you made them,” she said. “And then you go back and hardly recognize them and feel like the person who made them wasn’t you but someone else, like a sister or something. And you wonder ‘What was she like?’”