



VIOLA YESILTAC, *Regional Express*, 2001. 6:25 MIN. LOOP, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO PROJECTION. VIDEOSTILL. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BANK, LOS ANGELES.

The Region of Unlikeness

Bank, Los Angeles, CA

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With lights dimmed, wind and forest sounds abounding, and just five video pieces displayed in two spacious rooms, the viewer is immediately cued into the presence of an unusually strong curatorial style in *The Region of Unlikeness*. Artist, and here, curator, Kim Schoen has taken five rather different video works by different artists and made an ensemble of them with hypnotic effect. *The Region of Unlikeness* is a meditation on portraiture with works that defy conventional expectations of the genre, featuring absent, mute and resistant subjects in an echo chamber of light and sound. Resisting the idea

of fidelity so ingrained in portraiture, Schoen calls on the Platonic *regio dissimilitudinis*—the region of dissemblance, that which is most unlike us—in her curator's statement. It is in this difference or misfit between the subject and the "portrait" that the active imagination can take hold.

This quirky show asks more questions than it answers. The expanded field of portraiture here plays photographic and painterly traditions of the portrait against video works that emphasize their distrust of the conventional boundaries of the frame—almost every video here loops seamlessly back into itself. Is it that the portrait cannot match its subject, or that the subjects' appearances do not match their actual being, or that the frame cannot contain these beings with any

real fidelity?

Upon entering the space, the viewer is flooded by a vibrant green forest with insect and frog sounds so piercing as to set the mood of the entire first room, making it into a kind of video jungle. Covering an entire wall, Viola Yesiltac's *Regional Express* (2001) is a leafy, six-minute, static-camera video loop. A woman appears in the upper left of the forest and clumsily drags a piece of rolling luggage down screen and off to the right. Wearing a business suit with slicked back hair, she looks professional, almost like a stewardess who would be at home on a city street or in an airport but not in a dense, leafy forest. She struggles with her luggage and makes her way off screen, only to reappear in six minutes to do it all over again. She's not as much a person or a character as an existential symbol, an urbanite in a forest looking again and again for her direction, a professional traveler who traverses but never arrives at any destination. It's less a portrait of a traveler than a meditation on transience and the great disjuncture between us and the forest: the more purposeful her efforts in crossing, the more out of place she becomes. We cross a space in time and once we pass, the space rebukes our presence; the forest absorbs everything.

While Yesiltac's forest is projected on a whole wall, Corinna Schnitt's *The Sleeping Girl* (2001) is framed on a flat screen monitor. The only video to employ a moving camera, edits, and a narrative, it pans over a seemingly uninhabited European housing development to settle on a French window opening into a room with a large reproduction of Vermeer's *Sleeping Girl* hanging on the wall. The phone rings a few times and a machine picks up. A man leaves "Ms. Schnitt," presumably the artist, a very long rambling message in German. He had come a year ago to discuss disability insurance with her but left his pen there, which he is missing very much, and wants it back; could she call him at her convenience so they could arrange something? The triviality of the message and his desire for the pen contrasts with the unexplained absence of the artist. She may be away, disabled, or even asleep like the woman in the Vermeer reproduction dominating the

room. Somewhere between a portrait and a genre piece, this iconic painting is of a young woman asleep at a table, sitting with her eyes closed, with another portrait hanging above her and a door opening to a large, bright, empty room behind. Inscrutable like many Vermeer paintings, it is both ordinary and exceptional, a moment frozen in time, a woman observed without her knowing it.

Schnitt's video is at once empty and full, an absent woman's room with a portrait inside it and yet another inside that. The video is an excerpt of Schnitt's life, empty and full. It captures a misrecognition, the insurance agent who sees Schnitt far less than he sees himself in his symbolic fixation on a missing pen. He, however, is invisible, too; we overhear him the same way we spy on the room and the same way that Vermeer captured his sleeping girl.

Across the gallery is another video projection, static like the remaining shots in the show. In a large studio-like room, a man

cradles his leg motionlessly in a 22-minute seamless loop. He is without expression, but his gesture is reverent: he holds his calf like a child or a religious icon. The effect is suspended between the mystical and the absurd, not entirely unlike the pen across the way. Simon Cunningham's *Mollymuddle* (2007) plays on the verb "mollycoddle," to treat someone too indulgently or over protectively, as well as the noun "mollycoddle," an effeminate or ineffectual man or mama's boy. The man is transfixed by his leg, somewhere between wonder and pain, in a kind of narcissistic circle. It's a look within, but deliberately staged as it is, this portrait also becomes a look outwards, a performative display. Not only is the man motionless, he is also mute, caught in the amber of wonder and self-referentiality: he's his own mommy, or his leg is his Christ child. But he is not perfectly still. We see him hover and quiver, calling attention to the deliberate effort of intentional will. The man's beard heightens the echo of



CORINNA SCHNITT, *Sleeping Girl*, 2001. 9 MIN. SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO LOOP WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES. VIDEOSTILL. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BANK, LOS ANGELES.



SIMON CUNNINGHAM, *Mollymuddle*, 2007. 21:51 MIN. LOOP, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO PROJECTION. INSTALLATION VIEW. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BANK, LOS ANGELES.

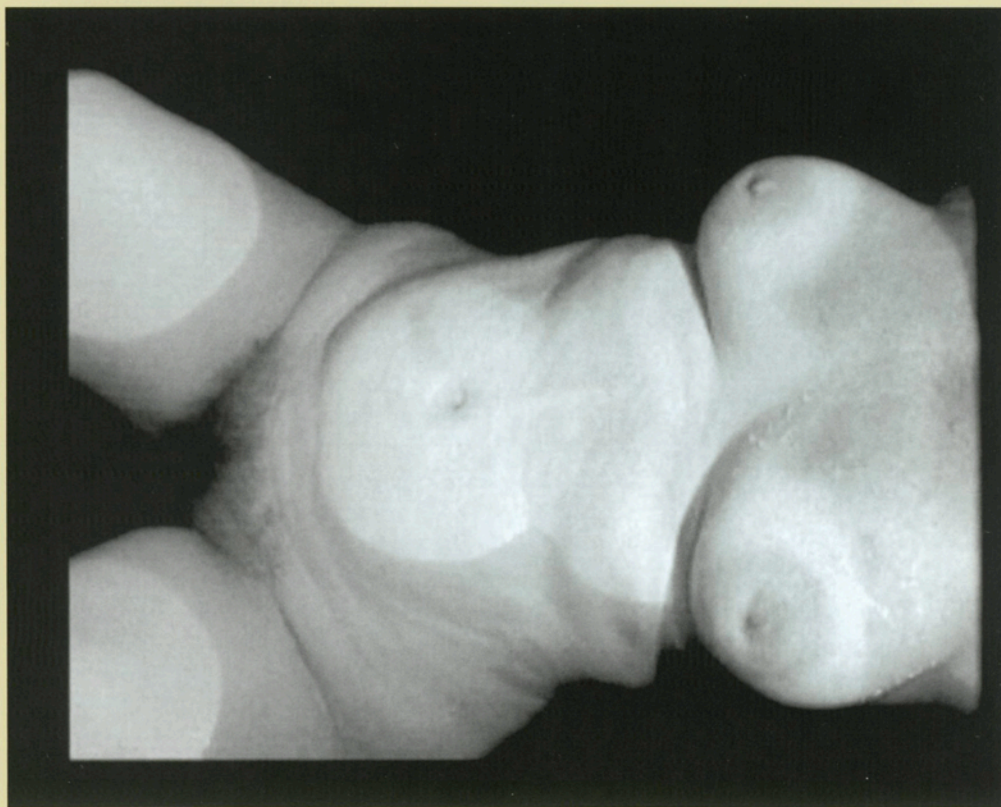
religious iconography, while the absence of explicit religious symbols puts the focus on a theology of the self.

The second room contains only two videos. I emphasize the spacing here because the show is also an installation whose pieces are carefully calibrated for full effect. Immediately to the side as you enter is Esther Teichmann's *Drinking Air* (2007), a three-minute video loop (shot on 16mm film). The camera focuses tightly from the neck to the mid-thighs of a mature, heavy-set woman partly submerged in very dark bathwater. As she breathes, her body rises and sinks in the water; topographies of body and water like land and sea reconfigure again and again, repetitive and soothing. The body is an island—living, rising and sinking with the tide. Commonly taken as the most direct sign of life, the breath becomes the core marker of self here, the minimal but never-ceasing pulsation of simply staying put, living. As with Yesiltac's forest video, there is an existentialist charge here, the minimalist reduction of being into breathing: rhythmic, hypnotic, and without reference to a personal self one might expect in a conventional portrait. As with all the others except *Sleeping Girl*, *Drinking Air* is on a seamless loop that lends it a timeless quality, so while the breath is a marker of life and a measure of time, the video seems located outside time, in an eternal present. This body, though on display, is sufficient unto itself. It's a kind of maternal body and at the same time childlike, enclosed in a watery womb.

The final piece is another large wall projection, also a static shot except that the camera is handheld, framing a window in which the curtains billow randomly in and out revealing scenes of a beach outside. The jitters in the frame of Dorit Cypis's *The Rest in Motion* (2002) remind us of the human presence of the artist in the work. The video was shot in Tel Aviv, and when one learns that Cypis was born in Israel, it begins to take on a more haunting quality. The push and pull of the curtains through the two sides of the window are already hypnotic, a play between the outside and interior. Is Cypis commenting on Israel, on her border status as an emigrant, or even on the presence and absence of Palestine here? All are possible. While the

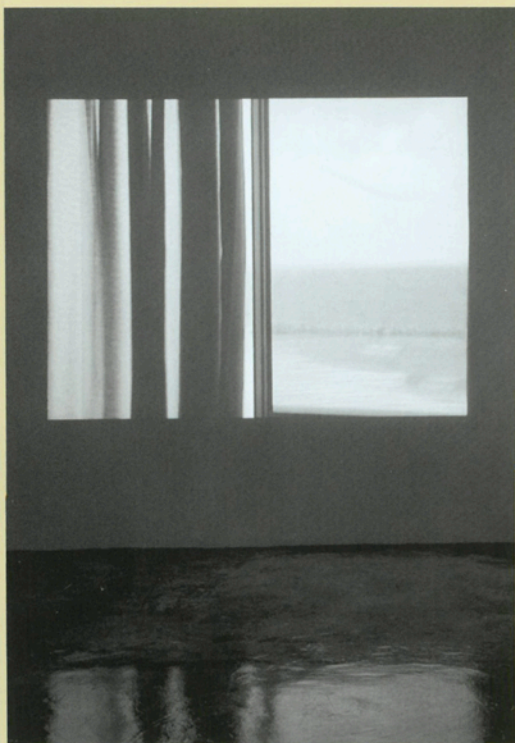
forest sounds dominate our entry into the gallery, the billowing winds (reminiscent of breathing except in their less regular beat) predominate at the end. They are a kind of frame of the natural around the human, except the natural is of course technologically manipulated.

There are no subjects of these works, or are there? As in Schnitt's *Sleeping Girl*, there is no person in Cypis's video, just the traces of one. What we expect from portraits is both



ESTHER TEICHMANN, *Drinking Air*, 2007. 16MM TRANSFERRED TO DVD, 3 MIN. LOOP. VIDEOSTILL. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BANK, LOS ANGELES.

fidelity and distinction; they must be true but no two should be alike. The individuation that marks classical portraiture—a careful calibration so that no portrait resembles any other—is nearly absent here. Portraiture also accommodates the representation of types: the business woman, the sleeper, self-absorbed youth, the aging mother or the emigrant. This kind of typological representation can also be said to be the not-me, where the resemblance meets the region of



DORIT CYPIS, *The Rest in Motion*, 2002. 13 MIN. LOOP, SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO. INSTALLATION VIEW. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BANK, LOS ANGELES.

1. Hopps used this phrase to describe the Ferus Gallery's new space designed by Blum in 1958 in a gallery talk at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, March 8, 2005. See my "Reflections of Walter Hopps in Los Angeles," *X-TRA*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2005, n. 19, p. 36.
2. Some recent examples are *Los Angeles 1955-1985, Birth of an Artistic Capital*, Centre Pompidou, 8 March–17 July 2006; *Ferus*, Gagosian Gallery, New York, September 12–October 19, 2002; *Radical Past: Contemporary Art & Music in Pasadena, 1960-1974*, Armory Center for the Arts/Art Center College of Design, February 7–April 11, 1999; *Sunshine & Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark, May 16–September 7, 1997/ UCLA Hammer Museum of Art, Fall 1998.

dissimilarity. In a way all portraits refer to both the type and the individual, and this is why we "recognize" them. The "portraits" in *The Region of Unlikeness* all variously reject language, symbolism, pictorial representation and narrative—the standard tools of the presentation of self. Instead they use gesture, reference, repetition, place and timelessness, and they include both the ordinary and the incidental.

Ultimately, this is a curator's show, carefully composed around questions of resemblance and its other, dissemblance. Kim Schoen has chosen work that defies expectation not just of portraiture or self-identity, but also of time and space. Schoen evokes Plato's notion of the region of dissemblance to introduce work that deploys the Platonic distrust of the simulacrum. For Plato, every representation (copy or portrait) doesn't simply misrepresent its object, it distracts us from its truth. The portraits in *The Region of Unlikeness* keep us away from their subjects and thereby compel us to think about what's true. Aristotle trusts mimesis, but Plato does not. Shot in video, many of these pieces reference photography but add the element of time, manifested in the many small movements against the still camera. The problem in the painted or photographic portrait is that by freezing time it reduces the "lifelike" aspect and introduces death. But just as there is no clear frame, no measure of who is inside and who outside the frame—or whether they are still or moving, so is time undone by the seamless loops—there's no beginning or end. The result is a hauntingly absent presence, a recurrence of being without the usual tropes of self or subject that the portrait relies upon.

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