Keren Cytter

CHICAGO
at Museum of Contemporary Art

by Kyle MacMillan

It seemed a familiar cinematic moment: a woman puts a gun to her temple and pulls the trigger but all that is heard is a click. But wait. “Now quiet, now listen,” she says cryptically. “These words are delaying my death.” Suddenly, blood splats onto the opposite wall, though no bullet is ever discharged. This unexpected, disorienting and fantastical conclusion to the approximately eight-minute video Something Happened (2007), which begins as an apparent tale of revenge on an unfaithful lover, typifies the work of Keren Cytter. The Israeli-born, New York-based artist enjoys warping reality by thwarting cinematic and narrative conventions in her low-tech, self-aware, deliberately kitschy productions.

Nine of Cytter’s videos from the past decade, including Something Happened, were presented in her solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). The show premiered last year at the Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, where it was curated by former director Jacob Fabricius. The videos in the show ranged from an untitled 2009 piece that draws on John Cassavetes’s 1977 film Opening Night, about a stage actress reflecting on her life, to Siren (2014), a contemporary rethinking of the mythical call of the siren that incorporates webcam footage, computer-screen captures and digital effects.

Fortunately, these works were not simply screened one after another in a darkened projection room at the MCA. Instead, each had a separate alcove with its own distinctive feel: some were large and some intimate, some dark and some illuminated. This variety, combined with the galleries’ carpeted floors and plentiful benches and chairs, made for a comfortable and involving viewing experience too often lacking in film-centric exhibitions. The only detractor was the way in which distracting sounds from the other videos flowed into each space.
Also on view were four colorful panoramic drawings of Cytter’s living room, rendered with Sharpie markers on white vinyl, as well as HOME (2013), a set of 60 drawings on 8-by-8½-inch paper that have a deliberately crude, stream-of-consciousness quality. More telling of her approach to art-making than the drawings were two absurdist text panels in which Cytter parodied such exhibition aids, offering a series of statements about her working methods that were somewhat illuminating but also jargony. A good example is: “In Four Seasons the repetition of images and texts intensifies the subject and deconstructs the content.”

Although Cytter is interested in subverting virtually every element of cinema, writing lies at the core of her work. This is made especially clear by her decision to publish two collections of film, music video and performance scripts as an accompaniment to this show. She asked curator Naomi Beckwith, who oversaw the MCA presentation, and Fabricius to divide her writings into volumes that she amusingly titled The Best of Keren Cytter and The Worst of Keren Cytter. Like her films, Cytter’s writing, with its stylized language and (sometimes annoyingly) cyclical repetition, finds its roots in the elusive world of Samuel Beckett, especially his masterpiece, Waiting for Godot. If her videos do not attain Beckett’s level of existential truth, they are nonetheless inventive, surprising and provocative on their own terms.
Two short video works by Keren Cytter recently on view in New York both feature, typically for this artist, bare interiors and non-actors from whom she draws performances that strike a delicate balance between professional and amateur. In her second New York solo, the young Israeli artist, who lives in Berlin, extended her study of cinematic conventions and how they mediate individual identities.

The show’s title, “Les Ruissellements du Diable” (The Devil’s Streams), comes from Julio Cortázar’s story “Blow-Up,” on which the 10-minute title work is based (both videos 2008). It’s the same story that inspired Antonioni’s film; Cytter’s interpretation couldn’t be more different. The story’s first line is read in voiceover partway through: “It’ll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or by continually inventing modes that serve no purpose.” Cytter demonstrates this subject confusion through the interchanging identities of a sexy French man and woman who, it is revealed, are imagining each other.

As the video begins, she appears on television, describing a man watching her from the sofa. He masturbates while watching. Even in this, the ultimate solitary activity, his identity dissolves into hers, as the video alternates between his cock and her ecstatic face; she has taken his place on the couch (and smokes while she’s jerking off). In a bathroom/darkroom, they each enlarge a photograph of a wintry park,
and then meet, nervously, on a bench there, where they narrate their own meeting as it happens, and she rights a bottle of water that he spills. He later realizes that only the photograph (which shows the now empty bench) is real; she, back on screen, reports that she does not exist. The comical incongruity of the Chinese string music on the soundtrack heightens the mood of unreality.

Where *Les Ruisselements* is sexy and tender, the 7-minute, looped *G For Murder* is chilling and darkly funny. Despite its title, it bears scant resemblance to Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder*, in which a jealous husband’s perfect plan to murder his cheating wife is twice foiled. In Cytter’s video, a man becomes obsessed with his pregnant neighbor and enters her home to kill her, watched by two young men who recall the preppy sociopaths from Michael Haneke’s recent film *Funny Games*. According to press materials, these sadists represent the man’s conscience; if so, the woman is screwed. Like *A Clockwork Orange*’s Beethoven-loving droogs, the two thugs constantly start and stop a recording of a Chopin piano piece, while brutalizing the man and woman in alternation and chatting among themselves. At one point they bicker over who has the better lines.

The dialogue, which is dubbed slightly out of sync, is subtitled in Japanese, and parts of the story are told via Japanese text, adding a layer of absurdity. Opaque talk, delivered deadpan, abounds: Thug A: “What’s she doing here?” Thug B: “She’s not doing here.” The characters in Cytter’s world seem to exist only to play out scenes from movies they remember vaguely and piecemeal. Her vision is so convincing that the viewer gets the deliciously uneasy feeling of being no better off than they are.

Photo above: The Devil’s Streams, 2008, video, approx. 103/4 minutes; at Thierry Goldberg.

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