

Film in Spotlight at the Whitney Biennial

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This year's Whitney Biennial turns decisively toward performance and film. The Breuer building's 4th floor is devoted to live events, where folding chairs are set up before a 6,000-square-foot theater. Performances will also take place amid the works on the 5th floor mezzanine. Biennial curators Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders invited Thomas Beard and Ed Halter of Light Industry, the Brooklyn film and video center, to book screenings for 15 film- and video-makers, giving each artist about a week to screen their work in the museum's second-floor theater.



At a preview screening on Friday, Beard and Halter showed films by Luther Price, Laida Lertxundi, Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler. These filmmakers are by no means undiscovered in the experimental film world, though their appearance in the art world is new.

The Bostonian Price makes film about film by heavily working 16mm film stock: burying it in the yard, scraping it with tools, staining it with inks and hand-splicing the footage. His material approach to film has precedents in Wallace Berman and Stan Brakhage, and is now a popular approach in experimental film.

In *After the Garden: Silking* (2010), much of the disfigured remains of a strip of 16mm film pass through the projector without yielding more than an occasional discernible image, effectively stills or slides, barely perceptible amidst streams of visual abstraction. Glimpses of what appear to be a home movie, and a still portrait of a nude, are like figure studies in the jumping series of blue and brown abstractions. At one point, the broken images give way to a sequence in which a boy is shown playing.

Shelly [sic] Winters (2010) comprises Price's typically damaged film, in an austere black-and-white palette. The soundtrack features voices discussing first-person experiences of domestic violence. A husband confesses to beating his wife day after day. A wife recounts how she tried to stop her husband from going out to drink because if

inebriated he would most certainly abuse her. The somewhat restrained, even quaint language used by the speakers suggests that this is a period piece, which creates a sense of distance.

Unlike Price, Bilbao-born, Los Angeles-based Laida Lertxundi isn't focused on the material aspect of film. Using 16mm, she picks her shots and holds. Inside the frame there is rarely action of any kind. A figure occasionally moves, or the wind reveals that the image on screen is not a still photo. When she does admit action, it's a nice touch. In *Footnotes to a House of Love* (2007) a woman exits the abandoned house in which much of the piece was filmed, and the screen door falls off in her hand. She keeps walking, without hesitation.

Lertxundi's soundtrack favors twee or retro music, like '60s-era girl groups or Mexican radio. Some of the film features the sound and image of someone scraping randomly at a double bass. Each of the shots is obviously composed, incorporating the mountains and arid earth of her adopted California. She plants her people in the landscape, sometimes absurdly (a couple, about twenty feet apart, feet facing each other, beneath a long blanket) or subtly (a barely visible still figure to the extreme right of the frame, reflected in a mirror).

Both Nathaniel Dorsky and Jerome Hiler are represented by silent films with layers of superimposed images, though the filmmakers use different methods to conjure multiple worlds. Dorsky, who lives in San Francisco, trains his camera on shop windows in *The Return* (2011). The film is most especially concerned with what the camera records in the window of a florist shop. He also goes into nature to milk the halo effect of the sun shot through the threads of a spider's web. The film inhabits the extremes of natural light, looking directly into the sun or wallowing in

shadows. Dorsky's sense of light, shadow and film color is keen, as in shots of two women having coffee: the shadows on the cup, the hands in motion as they speak. Shooting for the first time in Fuji color negative after the discontinuation of Kodachrome, he uses film to disclose an enhanced, quiet reality of sunlight as it moves around a still, cloistered world and a dry winter landscape.

Where Dorsky doubles images by filming reflective surfaces, Hiler uses multiple exposures to compound one over the other. Hiler, like Dorsky, has been making films since the 1960s. Hiler makes films as unique objects--excepting the HD transfer used at the press screening. During the Biennial proper, the 16 mm strip will be projected. Press materials portray the artist as a loner, exhibiting for his friends, though he has shown at The New York Film Festival. A wintery field, a stretch of barbed wire, sandbags tied to ropes as part of a river levy, close-ups of milkweed and Sweet William, a stone façade with stained glass and a building with a red-tiled roof as seen through wrought iron: these motifs appear simultaneously in varying combinations, flecked with jelly beans of light and color from different exposures. Sometimes the multiple exposures are colored red, as if filmed through a gel.

Hiler and Dorsky make pretty films that exploit the color of reproduction and distortion. The beauty seems too easy at times, like the old-fashioned abstraction that forms Price's *After the Garden*. As the Whitney promotes film as an alternative to "art" made with "traditional techniques," it might bear asking how such abstraction would fair if presented in, say, photography or painting. The fetishism of medium and obsolescence are more closely scrutinized elsewhere in the visual arts.

Luther Price (b. 1962), *Meat*, 1999. Handmade slide, 1 1/2 x 1 1/2 in. (3.8 x 3.8 cm). Collection of the artist. © Luther Price; courtesy the artist

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