New Work by Faculty Artists

CALCULATED RISKS

September 15–December 12, 2010

Elizabeth Wyckoff, Martha McNamara, and Meredith Martin, eds.

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Calculated Risks: New Work by Faculty Artists

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Designed by: Base
Most of the shots in *The Malady of Death* focus intently, if sensually, on the male nude. Both in Hollywood cinema and pornography, representations of the sexualized body are overwhelmingly female. Male nudity remains anathema, with the marginal exceptions of queer cinema and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, recent American mainstream comedies such as *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, whose leading men bare all. Whereas in Western high art from Michelangelo to Mapplethorpe the male nude is imbued with authority and force, Skoller’s figures resemble instead those unusual moments in the canon: the Dying Gaul, the Pietà, and other works depicting men suffering “the malady of death.” But while Skoller’s nudes are supine, receptive, even vulnerable, they are anything but resigned.

Reversing the gaze as well as reorienting it to the male heterosexual perspective, Skoller does not adapt so much as supplement what he recognizes as Marguerite Duras’s “parable—an indictment really—about the male sexuality this culture has constructed.” In selecting images to accompany a female narrator describing an erotic encounter between an unnamed male “you” and the exchangeable “she” in his sexual service, Skoller “exploits the possibilities opened up by Duras’s ambiguities by removing the image of the woman altogether,” as Anne Callahan describes, “foreground[ing] the male protagonist’s reason for hiring the woman, his desire to explore his own body, to know how he himself experiences pleasure.” In so doing, Skoller enacts a feminist critique in league with those women film and video makers (Catherine Breillat, Jane Campion, Carolee Schneemann) who also use male nudity in ways that
subvert cultural paradigms governing power and pleasure. Here it is the male who is fragmented, multiplied, deindividuated, and fetishized by the unseen author's voice and desire. And, in a resounding departure from Hollywood and porn conventions, the film's climax coincides with the female orgasm.

Whereas dominant modes of looking assume and invite gazes that are by turns reverent, leering, or skittish, here the look displays both curiosity and familiarity with the literal embodiment of one's desire. The identity of that "one"—a new or longtime lover, or even oneself—shifts in interplay with the slippage of subjectivity within Duras's prose. Though the voice we hear and the bodies we see are undeniably gendered, the subjectivity that the film constructs seems genderless. The effect evokes the process of fantasy with its fluid, eroticized modes of identification. As Skoller explains, "I am interested in generating contradictory desires on the part of the viewer that are at once heterosexual, homosexual, and narcissistic."³

Still from The Malady of Death, 1994, 16mm, Color film, Sound, 43 mins.

Ultimately the male remains as opaque as the impenetrable reflective surfaces of the skyscrapers and ocean waves that are interspersed with these abstracted, equally sublime bodyscapes. But even as this alternating procession visually echoes the repetitions and progressions of Duras's hypnotic prose, the tension between word and image works contrapuntally to reconceive what Duras describes as "an alien form on the bed."⁴ This unknowability of the other comprises both the drive of artistic exploration and its outer limits. Raising the questions of the meaning of love and of its absence, The Malady of Death poses the answer: "Look for yourself."⁵

Maria San Filippo — Cinema and Media Studies Program

* The Malady of Death will be screened in Collins Cinema on October 20, 2010 at 6:30 pm; it is not on view in the gallery.

1. Filmmaker's statement for program notes, Pacific Film Archive, 1994.
5. Ibid., 17.