

WELLESLEY COLLEGE

New Work by Faculty Artists

CALCULATED RISKS

September 15–December 12, 2010

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

Judith Black
Carlos Dorrien
Bunny Harvey

Clara Lieu
Phyllis McGibbon
Salem Mekuria

C. (Qing-Min) Meng
Andrew Mowbray
David Teng Olsen

Daniela Rivera
Christine Rogers
Jeffrey Skoller

the Davis.

DAVIS MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTER

Calculated Risks: New Work by Faculty Artists

This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, September 15–December 12, 2010.

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

This exhibition, along with its catalogue and programs are generously supported by Wellesley College Friends of Art, the Elizabeth Bein Keto '48 Endowed Memorial Art Fund, the Office of the President, the Office of the Provost and Dean of the College, the Art Department, and the Committee on Lectures and Cultural Events, Wellesley College.

Copyright 2010 by the Davis Museum and Cultural Center

Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by the Davis Museum and Cultural Center

Wellesley College
www.davismuseum.wellesley.edu

Designed by: Base

Jeffrey Skoller

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

Text performed by JD Trow. Cinematography by Nancy Schiesari and Jeffrey Skoller. Distributed through Canyon Cinema Inc.

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."¹ 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."² 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.

2. Anne Callahan, Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality without Women (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 185.

3. Filmmaker's statement for program notes, Pacific Film Archive, 1994.

4. Marguerite Duras, The Malady of Death, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 17.