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Los Angeles Times – Arts & Culture

Critics choice

Review: Bush and Obama walk into a bar...



Still from Julian Rosefeldt's film installation, "American Night." (Young Projects)

By Leah Ollman

October 21, 2012, 4:30 p.m.

If you start watching "American Night" at the beginning, or come in somewhere midstream, you might mistake Julian Rosefeldt's film installation for a technically deft piece of collage, a patchwork of snippets appropriated from the cinematic canon.

On each of five screens, arranged in a semi-circle at Young Projects, scenes unfurl that look utterly familiar, as if lifted from any number of classic American westerns. There's a lone cowboy on a horse, a tumbleweed rolling through a deserted town, boisterous carousing in a saloon.

But see the 40-minute piece all the way through and zinging incongruities pop up, humorous and telling anachronisms.

What emerges over the full length of the work is Rosefeldt's subversive brilliance. This is no cut-and-paste job (though such a thing, like Christian Marclay's much-lauded "The Clock," can also amaze), but rather a pitch-perfect re-creation of filmic clichés, tweaked to expose their own artifice and to comment pithily on how the narrative of the frontier pervades contemporary American culture and foreign policy.

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A German artist living in Berlin, Rosefeldt filmed "American Night" in 2009 on locations in the U.S. and Spain, with a sizable cast and extremely high production values. It takes fluency in the conventions of the western genre to so ably contradict and undermine them.

On the central screen, cowboys cluster around a nighttime campfire, mostly boasting about guns and justice. Their conversation flows smoothly and forcefully, even though the dialogue is lifted from an array of disparate sources, primarily old films and recent politics.

"Out here," one fellow says, quoting John Wayne in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," "a man settles his own problems."

Next thing you know, another breaks into a spot-on imitation of George W. Bush, whose speech reeks of the same cowboy bravado. There's a bit of rapping (courtesy of 50 Cent) about the sexual charge a gun grants its owner, and someone throws in a reference to Jean-Luc Godard.

One of the guys asks for some lip balm (the fire makes them so dry!) and gradually the carefully constructed then deconstructed scene recomposes itself, the players resuming their manly, brooding stares into the fire.

Self-reflexive revelations and coy interventions spike the saloon scene as well. A traveling troupe stages a puppet show featuring two dusty figures with clashing convictions -- Obama and Bush. The Obama puppet speaks of high ideals, and the Bush puppet counters that he feels like shooting somebody.

After the requisite barroom brawl, the rowdy crowd breaks out in an achingly beautiful rendition of "Lacrimosa," from Mozart's Requiem Mass, a plea for mercy on judgment day. The scene ends with the director praising the cast and asking them to hand in their guns on the way out.

Rosefeldt sets us around a metaphorical campfire where the trope of rugged individualism gets bandied about, mocked and scrutinized. His thoroughly engaging period piece is as much about the here and now as the Wild West of yore, and as much about myths as their making, remaking and unmaking.

Young Projects, Pacific Design Center, 8687 Melrose Ave., (323) 377-1102

through Oct. 27. Closed Sunday and Monday. Saturday by appt.

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