



Artist interview

A very modern melodrama

Catherine Sullivan's large-scale film installations hover on the borders of drama, visual art and "performance"

ARTIST INTERVIEW

ADRIAN DANNATT

Over the past few years, US artist Catherine Sullivan has developed her own highly distinctive form of art, making dramatic theatrical performances which are filmed and presented as large-scale installations. She grew up in California and studied acting for many years and also visited Japan to research its theatrical and dance traditions. From the murky borders of American avant-garde theatre, Sullivan has steadily moved into the strong light of the contemporary art world, her filmed spectacles, animated tableaux, seemingly refer simultaneously to the history of theatre, film and "performance". Her most ambitious project to date, *The Chittendens*, is currently on show at both her New York gallery, Metro Pictures, and Tate Modern, London. The six-channel video shows 16 actors dressed in 19th- and 20th-century costumes. Each is assigned a specific character and way of moving, and they perform rhythmically in different choreographed patterns and random combinations. The title of the piece is derived from that of an insurance agency, the Chittenden Group, whose corporate symbol is a lighthouse. Sullivan adopted this symbol as a metaphor for self-direction and self-possession. The work is filmed primarily in an abandoned Chicago office building and in a small lighthouse on Poverty Island near the Wisconsin shore of Lake Michigan.

The Art Newspaper: Can you describe the thinking behind *The Chittendens*?

Catherine Sullivan: It is inspired by the theory of the Norwegian-American economist Thorstein Veblen on the "leisure classes" [whom he described as people rich enough to spend their lives free from time-consuming work, duties and responsibilities], and by the choreographic methodology and numerical sequences that I worked on with my choreographer-collaborator Sean Griffin. I saw signs for Chittendens insurance company in Phoenix. Its lighthouse shape got me thinking of maritime imagery.



TAN: Is it important that an audience knows some of the background to the work?

CS: It is important that they familiarise themselves with my references, but it is not obligatory. They can appreciate motifs such as costume and setting for what they are. I hope that the work is compelling to look at regardless of the references.
TAN: Like the director Jean Luc Godard, you often separate sound and image. He conceives of such experimentation as political. Is your work political?



Stills from *The Chittendens*, 2005, currently showing at Metro Pictures in New York and Tate Modern in London

CS: No, I live in a different art-making time. Artistic approaches that might once have been considered conservative are now seen as progressive. Formal experimentation doesn't have the same political function as it did in Godard's time.

TAN: The contemporary art world has more money and mystique than, say, experimental theatre, dance or music, all of which seem like marginalised ghettos by comparison with the institutional visual art machine.

CS: There's a lot of truth in that.

TAN: Anything now "framed" (literally) and presented as art will make more money and get a bigger audience than almost any other form of creativity.

CS: I don't agree. What about popular media like film and fashion—they get the lion's share of audiences.

TAN: The theatre seems the least incorporated into visual arts, compared to say cinema or music?

CS: That is true now, but in the early 20th century it was not the case. Picabia, Malevich and many of the Constructivists were involved with theatre. Also Vuillard made stage screens.

TAN: There is often a manic energy in your tableaux comparable to Richard Foreman's "Hysterical" theatre.

CS: Yes, I appreciate his work very much.

TAN: How important is humour in the work?

CS: Very important, although the humour is a surplus of other

things. It's an aspect of my sensibility that reads as comedy.

TAN: Is the gap between theatre and "art" the inspiration behind your work?

CS: No, I think the work is about other things. I started making work in the theatre. If the gap reads as important, it's not conscious.

TAN: Does the audience require unusual patience for your work?

CS: No more than for anyone else's work, but because my works often last over an hour they do require time.

TAN: Is it important the audience sees all 104 minutes of *The Chittendens*?

CS: Of course! No really, I would like them to spend as much time as possible with the work. ■

Biography

Currently showing: *The Chittendens*, Tate Modern, London, until 8 January; Metro Pictures, New York, until 23 December. **Born:** 1968, Los Angeles, lives and works in Los Angeles. **Education:** California Institute of Arts, Valencia, 1992, BFA; Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, 1997, MFA. **Selected solo shows:** 2005: Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland 2004: Giò Marconi, Milan; Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany 2003: Metro Pictures, New York; Centre D'Art Contemporain Fri-Art Kunsthalle, Fribourg, Switzerland