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T. J. Wilcox
METRO PICTURES

The films in T. J. Wilcox's recent show proposed an unlikely trio of heroines: Elisabeth, Empress of Austria, assassinated in 1898; Jackie O, widow of both John F. Kennedy and Aristotle Onassis; and Jerry Hall, supermodel and ex of Mick Jagger. The three may meet in glamour, but their respective sorts of glamour vary wildly, and my shorthand ID's above—"assassinated," "widow," "ex of Mick Jagger"—suggest the women suffered differently too. Yet Wilcox manages to find in the biography of each of them some sympathetic strain that makes them parallel. A man who loves women, he has invented a cinematic way of treating them that instantly endears itself to the viewer, while at the same time neatly critiquing both the social constructions that might oppress them and the visual media through which those constructions are so often supported and enforced.

Wilcox's films, which he has been showing in New York for about ten years now, are made using a collage technique involving 16-mm footage that he sometimes shoots himself as he travels around and sometimes takes off the television screen from movies and other programs. He may also train his camera on book and magazine spreads, turning printed reproductions into still images to be inserted among the moving ones. Built into the method is a degree of visual degradation: Focus falters, color fades, black-and-white breaks in. In the work on Elisabeth of Austria (one chapter in a three-part film titled *A Fair Tale [Extended Remix]*, 2006–2007), a shot of a troupe of Lippizaner stallions is so overexposed that the white horses glow like incandescent flares. Meanwhile, subtitles guide our reading of the narrative. The films look old and imperfect, like home movies made a long time ago—which suits Wilcox, who seems fascinated with memory and the past, and with rehabilitating stories so familiar and often told as to imprison their protagonists in stale morals. Staleness—the familiar, the known, the clichéd—provides the syntax of Wilcox's vocabulary; what he shows us we've already seen. Yet his imagery is often lovely, as when the camera is wrapped in the billowing silk of a parachute, or, in a very different way, when we watch Jerry Hall dancing onstage, victoriously feral.

In Elisabeth and Jackie, Wilcox finds women whose aristocracy has made them suspect, or worse. After Jackie married Onassis, he writes, countless paparazzi photographs sanctioned "the validity of public disdain toward her second marriage." Against this he sets her own dignified responses—her need for "release from the world's 'oppressive obsession' with her as the Kennedy widow," and her gratefulness

for "happiness and love." It's no contest, especially since Wilcox washes out the paparazzi photos to the point where they become elegiac. The film about Hall is somewhat different, a story not of tragedy but of self-willed triumph—of how an eighteen-year-old Texan used an \$800 windfall (the settlement from a car accident) to move to Paris and remake herself. Even here, though, a repeated image suggests what was at stake: A highway sign reads TEXAS 6. NORTH. EVACUATION ROUTE. A tale of success is also a tale of escape—and one finds oneself wanting escape for all of Wilcox's women.

The show also contained a group of wall pieces—collages featuring images of subject matter from the films—and a fourth film, this one without a heroine but with a seven-year-old Wilcox in her place. Remembering a long-ago visit to a county fair, another chapter of *A Fair Tale* magically conflates found and new footage, not to mention Native American rain dancers, erratic skydivers, and scrumptiously greasy-looking food. Lushly sensual and slyly funny, the film also has political points to make, but its interest lies less in its gentle sensitivity to social and technological relations than in Wilcox's ability to invest that sensitivity in familiar, well-used imagery—to make something eye-opening at the same time a welcome home.

—David Frankel



