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Still from Sue de Beer's "The Quickening," 2006.  
 (© Sue de Beer, Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York)

## Tinted Visions: Sue de Beer at Boesky East

BY JULIET HELMKE, MODERN PAINTERS | AUGUST 30, 2015

"The way I think about constructing images is connected to things like watercolor painting," says Sue de Beer. "Finding ways in video to make all the colors soften and bleed is exciting to me." The artist is showing me a collection of prisms and glass objects that she has used — to the detriment of her cameraman's back, she concedes — in conjunction with the camera lens to capture the indistinct, overlapping, or fragmented shots that splinter the wandering stories of her videos. Her most recent work, *The Blue Lenses*, a two-channel film projection on view at Marianne Boesky's Lower East Side location from September 9 to October 25, features one such image. A sword dancer is nearing the climax of his performance, but for a second, the shot changes and the camera is looking down on a girl illuminated by a harsh, green light. A watery duplicate floats to her left, mirroring her movements. Her attention is caught and she stares into the camera for a moment. Twinned, on two screens, four sets of sultry eyes blink up at the viewer.

As with watercolor, that fickle medium, much of de Beer's work teeters on chance — the perfect coming together of elements out of her control. "I stand behind my cameraman's shoulder, usually with a monitor I'm holding, and pass him things to try out. After working together for a while, you don't even have to say anything. He just knows," she explains. It's this kind of relationship that's key for de Beer, who relies on the collaboration with her writers, actors, and crew to determine the direction a work will take. It's not only the visuals that come about organically, left up to whatever happens between the wineglasses, kaleidoscopes, or other unorthodox objects she proffers on the day of shooting. The entire outcome of a de Beer film relies on experimentation, risk, and a group of people willing to follow her down the circuitous path along which these elements lead.

The melodious chant of an Arabic prayer opens the film. With two university research grants and a four-month-long teaching position at NYU Abu Dhabi, de Beer set out to make what she describes as a "Daphne du Maurier-inspired noir set in a fictional version of the Middle East." Du Maurier's stories, which were the basis for a number of Alfred Hitchcock films, are masterpieces of suspense and intrigue. For her film, de Beer has in fact lifted the title for *The Blue Lenses* from a du Maurier story, in which a woman, upon having the bandages removed after surgery to restore her sight, finds that through her new eyes, the people around her now alarmingly bear animal heads atop their human bodies. De Beer's version also creates alternate modes of seeing, but here — in her fractured scenes, often bathed in blue, deep green, and bright red — the altered perception presents a multifaceted picture of the Middle East, one that includes but also defies the preordained set of images the region usually calls to mind.

The opening scene is set by the voice of a young woman, who tells a story that starts at the end, with a funeral for a man she knew for a while, albeit not very well. It seems that nobody did. Over the course of 20 minutes, we learn a little more about this mysterious character, Daniel: salesman, connoisseur of fabric, drug user, magician, and thief. Interspersed between these semi-narrative fragments, told to us by either the character himself on-screen or the woman's voice, are snippets of disparate and unrelated scenes and snapshots. While the plot wanders, a plodding, clocklike drumbeat drives through the middle of the film, holding the viewer's attention through a story that leads only to further ambiguity. Interruptions come in the form of a burlesque dance performance, or eerie stills of the indoor ski slope located in the opulent Mall of the Emirates, shown deserted after hours. As the scenes skip and jump, they circle back to the captivating, plotless fragments of the enigmatic man's story. The character of Daniel came from a casting call de Beer put out, at a point when she and her writer on this piece, Nathaniel Axel, had only one scrap of text written, a monologue from the perspective of a shoplifting employee. With this in hand, de Beer sent out a call for all the characters in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, purely to see what this odd combination would yield. "A guy came in who thought he looked like the Ghost of Christmas Present," she recalls. "He was all wet from the rain, he had on a Hawaiian shirt, and he was very big, and looked like he was going to murder us all," she laughs. Though she ended up casting another actor in the role, the character of Daniel was born. De Beer often starts by "asking for something that doesn't work," but pursuing it nonetheless, because "asking this of a place or set of people can give you a truth-event, or a new kind of image that you wouldn't expect. You're not asking for an image you know you want, you're asking for the situation to tell you its own image." The plan is: don't make plans.

De Beer's style of winging it may be unconventional, but it's one that she has developed over time, with a band of fellow risk-takers willing to follow her lead — whether that's casting actors who might not ever see a script (many times she just describes what should happen in a scene and lets them take it from there), filming without a sense of the finished structure, or the aforementioned tendering of objects over her filmmaker's shoulder. Making herself (as well as others) nervous is a motivating force. She admits it's not always easy to find those eager to take the leap. "You have a crew and actors and equipment that cost a lot of money, and everybody waiting around to be told what to do, while I'm wondering, is anything

interesting going to happen today?” She laughingly admits that, to put it bluntly, this process “takes balls.” Much of this she learned during six years spent in Berlin in the early 2000s — needing a break from New York and its skyrocketing rents — where she developed her style of non-narrative stories through the videos *Hans & Grete*, 2003 (included in the Whitney’s 2004 Biennial), *Black Sun*, 2005, and *The Quickening*, 2006. She looked to the filmmakers of New German Cinema for inspiration, like Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, who, because of a loophole in German governmental funding for cinema and TV, were able to make their early films fast and loose but with what de Beer regards as incredible artistic integrity. Since returning to New York for a faculty position at NYU, finding money has become an even bigger pressure. “Your funders also have to believe in your balls,” she jokes. And *The Blue Lenses*, for which she transported this method of working to a country where she’d never worked before, took “the largest metaphorical balls.”

De Beer grew up around New England, moving to New York to study at Parsons for her undergraduate degree before receiving an MFA from Columbia. There, in her second year, after working primarily with photography, she made her first film, *Making Out with Myself*, 1997, which features the young artist, through visual trickery, performing the titular act. Not one to enjoy being in front of any camera, de Beer experimented with her own image early on because of an apprehension about asking other people to do things that could be potentially awkward or embarrassing. But that nervousness has proven to be a great stimulant for de Beer — anxiety becomes a type of challenge. “Now I feel very comfortable asking people to do that for me,” she says. “As I’ve grown older and made more work, the process has evolved into just pulling all my information out of the piece as it unfolds, rather than coming up with an idea and executing it.” Often her favorite parts of the final films are these unscripted moments. In *The Quickening*, she recalls telling German hard-core musician Gina D’Orio, who plays the lead in the film, to “go into the forest and dance with the animals.” Once settling on some music, Gina choreographed the ensuing ballroom dance she performs with a wolflike creature, after accepting a pineapple from his outstretched paw. Similarly taking a gamble in how she screens her work, with *The Blue Lenses* de Beer has opted for Marianne Boesky’s Lower East Side gallery, a bright, storefront space dominated by a wall of windows. It’s an attempt to get away from the pitch-black, curtained rooms where film is usually at home and which the artist dislikes. She’s created sculptural installation elements to work with the environmental constraints. Patterned, lacelike screens — made of MDF to block the bright sunlight — mimic the architecture seen throughout *The Blue Lenses*, and the windows are tinted blue. Rather than trying to make the space around the film disappear, to have no interference between the viewer and the work at hand, de Beer wants the screening environment to provide another element that can play into the audience’s interpretation.

The attraction of de Beer’s work is that she’s not interested in giving the viewer a clear, wrapped-up story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. She manages to make her films both suspenseful and captivating, yet awash with ambiguity and without conclusion. In so doing, she invites an abundance of readings. With still images, sections separated by vague titles, dual projections that sometimes sync, sometimes skip just a beat, and occasionally go off on their own tangents, de Beer uses any means to bring together the most interesting accumulation of scenes and visual elements to make her multilayered pieces. But there is one thing she won’t do: “Postproduction effects. I hate them,” she says. “I feel that it just looks like after effects.” Everything happens on set. What she shoots is what she gets; she doesn’t retouch her work. “I always shoot with colored lights. I’ll maybe lighten something occasionally, but I have to believe the world to be able to make it a world, which includes being in a room with the lights exactly the way they are,” she explains. Even if making that world, and getting that image with the lighting just perfect, requires a certain amount of trust, risk, and backache for those involved.

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