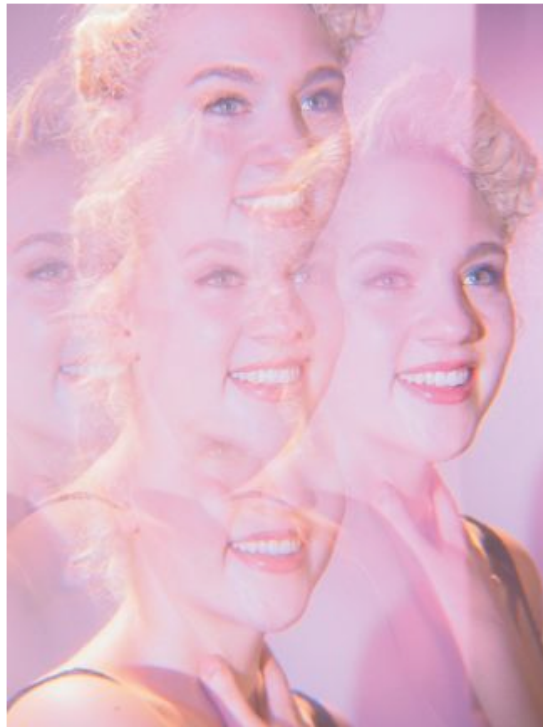


# Art in America

## Sue de Beer New York, at Boesky East by Anna Wallace-Thompson



Sue de Beer: Untitled (Still from *The Blue Lenses*), 2014, digital metallic C-print, 27 by 22 inches framed; at Boesky East

Although noir has a presence in Middle Eastern literature, it is arguably not an art form widely associated with the region. Sue de Beer, however, uses Abu Dhabi as the backdrop for her film noir production *The Blue Lenses* (2014), which was inspired by Daphne du Maurier's surreal short story of the same name. De Beer's two-channel film, the central work in this exhibition, counters the ultra-polished public image of the United Arab Emirates capital—often seen as Dubai's stiffer, less exciting sibling—with a grittier portrayal.

The premise of du Maurier's story is simple. The protagonist has undergone surgery to restore her vision, and is fitted with blue lenses. These reveal a world in which everyone has animal heads. At first, she thinks these are masks, but they turn out to be reflections of people's true natures (her seemingly doting husband is a vulture, the sweet nurse a snake, and so on), the lenses actually facilitating a kind of unmasking. Du Maurier probes notions of reliability and truth, perception and reality, and so, too, does de Beer, although this is where the similarities between the story and the film end: with de Beer's production, we follow the story of a con man, as narrated by a young Arab woman.

The film's mostly black-and-white footage flickers red or greenish-blue for split seconds here and there. The effect is akin to viewing a 3-D film without the glasses: are we seeing the "real" image or do our eyes deceive us? A Lynchian quality runs throughout the work, as in a trippy sequence with a flirtatious, pink-gauze-bedecked blonde Little Red Riding Hood. Elsewhere, in shots of abandoned highways, ramshackle buildings and impending dust storms, *The Blue Lenses* bears more than a passing resemblance to Chris Marker's *La Jetée*.

De Beer also exhibited a series of photographic stills from the film and two ceiling-height aluminum screens referencing Islamic mashrabiyas. Lastly—in a move that provided the show’s strongest link to du Maurier’s story—she tinted the gallery’s windows a deep blue, a color used widely in Islamic decorative arts. From outside the gallery, visitors saw an interior that appeared bathed in blue light. Stepping through the door, however, they realized that only the glass was colored and the inside was lit as usual. What they thought was “real” was not, and now, it seemed, they saw “clearly.”

*The Blue Lenses* has an interesting relationship to Abu Dhabi. The setting was to an extent coincidental; de Beer, who spent four months in Abu Dhabi, was unable to procure an indoor space for set-building and thus chose to scout what she has referred to as set-like locales around the city. Yet the film also presents itself as social commentary on the seedier side of life in such an oil capital.

To what extent would the film have involved the Middle East had de Beer been able to shoot it as originally intended, in constructed sets of her design? While it’s certainly refreshing to encounter a work challenging the usual bling-y portrayal of the Emirates, particular sequences suggest exoticization. One, for instance, involves a knife dance in a kitschy barber shop, while another shows locals in traditional dress gazing at Dubai’s famous indoor ski slope, the sudden appearance of which in this Abu Dhabi-based work is confusing and out of place. Does *The Blue Lenses* reveal something fresh about the Middle East? Or does it ultimately reinforce stereotypes of the Arab “other”? As the film draws to a close, the narrator says dolefully: “I was waiting for her, but it wasn’t me any more.” Perhaps “she” is Abu Dhabi.