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Video art takes us 'Elsewhere'

An exhibit at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum makes us ponder journeys, destinations and the search for meaning.

By Lennie Bennett, Times Art Critic

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Elsewhere

Continues at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, 4202 E Fowler Ave., Tampa, through Oct. 13. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday. Free. (813) 974-2849 or cam.arts.usf.edu.

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TAMPA - Journeys - not vacations, not trips, *journeys* - require fortitude. Commitment. Stamina. All for the promise of that nebulous thing we call knowledge, understanding and, maybe pretentiously, enlightenment.

It's a literary conceit that has been a central theme of Western literature since Odysseus set sail from Ithaca. Visual art has never done much with it, being able only to capture a moment on the canvas rather than a complete narrative arc. Even serial paintings were inadequate conveyances of journeys, more illustrations than explorations of the idea.

Video art has changed that, and "Elsewhere," an exhibition at the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, has multiple examples of how. Video art should not be lumped with movies, which have been doing the journey thing for decades based on novelistic models, because the intent of each is very different. The videos in "Elsewhere" range in format from documentary straightforwardness to absurdist fantasy. All allude to the "otherness" - of place, personality, culture, language or opportunity - a journey can provide. The way we recognize and respond to that otherness, or our failure to do so, is another point all make.

Fortitude, commitment and stamina are also asked of those who journey to see this show. Six videos and films total about 2 1/2 hours of viewing - plus time needed to examine photographs accompanying some of them - a lot of time for the average museumgoer. Perhaps David Norr, in his first turn as curator of exhibitions and special projects at CAM, asks too much. I think not, as long as you go prepared. I was richly rewarded by the experience, though it is intense. You can also dip your toes into the show, watching only parts of each. Because most are so artfully crafted, their messages are clear within shorter time spans. My advice, if you must make choices, is to commit to one or two and see them from start to finish. I couldn't tear myself away from any of them.

I laughed out loud several times during *Souvenir*, a tongue-in-cheek fictional quest for Cocoa Man, described as the only Nepal native uncorrupted by Western culture. The artist Stuart Hawkins, who has lived there off and on for 15 years, takes on the role of the assistant to a powerful American CEO (shown only as a suited torso) who is sent to find Cocoa Man and bring him back for her boss as an artifact for his art collection.

In other hands, the assistant would be a loathsome Ugly American. But Hawkins through most of the video is a naive bumbler who amuses the locals and us with her ridiculous assumptions.

Inept and dispirited, she abandons her mission and winds up in a hotel bar getting drunk when she spies Cocoa Man walking through the lobby. He's dressed in gangsta chic, but she fails to note that irony. Subsequent action includes a slapstick car chase, kidnapping and ceremonial rituals involving raw meat. I don't want to give away the ending except to say that the assistant returns home, feeling as if she has failed in her quest, and learns from her boss, in a surprise ending, that it has been a resounding success. The denouement has a powerful bite that effortlessly swings the tone from comedy to tragedy while remaining funny, a morality tale as parody.

An absurdist point of view continues in *Home* by Olaf Breuning, a two-screen video in which a narrator, filmed in black and white, recounts adventures enjoyed by him and his acquaintances, filmed in color. The vacuity of narrator Brian Kerstetter is funny and sweet at first, his pale eyes pools of innocuous bemusement as he starts talking about experiences that seem to have no connection. "Such a happy day" (or something like that) he says of a road trip with several other people that begins in an urban parking garage with a click of golf clubs and ends with their ambush of a young Amish man in Pennsylvania farm country whom they strip naked, maul and chase with the clubs.

He tells the story of an acquaintance who questions the meaning of life while sitting in a Swiss ski resort hot tub swilling Champagne. The man lurches from the tub, overcome with nausea. The camera pans to his trail of vomit which spells out the words "I exist." The creepiness escalates and by the end, I felt slightly nauseous.

Home and *Souvenirs*, though conceived on sweeping scales that take the "protagonists" far and wide, elaborate on the idea that miles traveled do not necessarily add up to a true journey. The artists purposely created videos stuffed with cliches to make that cliched point about pointlessness.

Mono Lake follows the real road trip in 1968 of Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Michael Heizer to California's Mono Lake, thought to be the oldest in North America. The trio were emerging leaders of a genre that has come to be known as land or earth art, monumental constructions using natural materials created outdoors in often remote areas. Smithson's most famous work is *Spiral Jetty* in Utah's Great Salt Lake, completed in 1970.

The plan was for Smithson and Holt, who were married, to edit the 8mm film and slides into a documentary. They didn't get around to it before he died in a 1973 plane crash while scouting locations for a Texas land art project. Holt took it up again in 2004 for a retrospective of her late husband that was exhibited at several major museums. It's guileless and optimistic, a self-portrait of three young artists on the brink of fame, scrambling around the ancient landscape with voiceovers by Smithson and Heizer reading passages from books about the lake. Smithson picks up handfuls of rocks that he later incorporated into an installation, along with his famous mirrors. At the end, they set fire to a map of the area; Smithson also used the cinders as part of that installation.

Holt has gone on to great success - her *Solar Rotary* is one of the most distinguished and famous works in the public art collection at USF - as has Heizer, who has devoted himself to his massive installation *City*, in the Nevada desert, which was profiled in the *New York Times Magazine* several years ago and won't be finished before 2010.

But it's Smithson who has attained cult status (much to Heizer's disgruntlement we learned in that profile), and this film, giving us a window into artistic inspiration and incubation, is soaked in nostalgic might-have-beens.

Emanuel Licha's *Preparing for Serious Events* is a hybrid balancing between fiction and documentary. USF commissioned it from the artist, who based it, with a wry reversal, on his *War Tourist* series, in which he visited international war zones and treated them as tourist destinations.

The new two-screen work was created in "peaceful" Tampa. Cheerleaders gather in one frame and begin their routine while in the other, the camera pans across a quaint wood-frame building labeled "Tourist Office." The young women wave their pompoms as hooded figures approach the building, douse it with gasoline and torch it. "Burn it! Burn it!" the cheerleaders chant.

Near the two video screens in the museum gallery are the charred remains of the structure. It's really destroyed, yet its destruction was manufactured and artificial, so its story is both fact and fiction. Licha's journey to Tampa for the purpose of burning a symbol of welcome for other travelers is most visibly a commentary on isolationism. Using cheerleaders adds a provocative element, implying that random mayhem is sometimes scarily similar to organized sport, whose participants are both the instigators and those who watch from the sidelines.

In their own ways, other works in "Elsewhere" make similar connections.

Patty Chang used the rivalry between small communities in China, each claiming to be the "real" Shangri-la, as the basis for her attempts to create her own version in Styrofoam and mirrors. Most of the video concentrates on the efforts of local laborers to realize her plans, and they perform like soldiers never questioning orders.

Sarah Anne Johnson documented her eco-tourist trip to the Galapagos Islands in photographs that line two gallery walls (it's the only installation without video) and supplements them with staged photographs of clay figures in those settings. They ask collectively: Which are more valid reflections of memory and experience?

The most cryptic work is *Message from Andree* by Joachim Koester. He used archival film recovered more than 70 years ago in the Arctic Circle that recorded the final days of a disastrous 1897 expedition to circumnavigate the North Pole by hot air balloon, organized by Swedish explorer Salomon Andree. The crew's remains and the film were found in the 1930s by other explorers. The film was damaged during its years in the cold. Koester isolated the marks of damage that appear as dots and blurs on the film's surface and they alone appear in his video, not any images of the men. It's a ghostly palimpsest of a human journey into oblivion.

Can the success of any journey be measured, especially when its outcome can never be certain at embarkation? As "Elsewhere" tells it, endings are different from destinations. And we never know exactly when that last moment begins.

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