

Naked City: Holly Zausner at Postmasters

by William Corwin

Wednesday, May 27th, 2015

The subject of Holly Zausner's 2015 film *Unsettled Matter* is the artist herself, but just as clearly, it is us, the viewers. It is a cyclical film, which variously embraces and casts off narrative, almost on a whim. Zausner passes through New York as a ghost — purposefully marching through empty streets, lobbies and stations, sometimes no more than a flicker, but just as often stopping to contemplate: a book in the basement of the Strand, the mangled visage of Queen Hatshepsut at the Metropolitan Museum, or us, the viewer, at the center of the swirling maelstrom of Times Square (the only time in which we see other human beings). Though she interacts with no one, she is performing for us, right up until the possible endpoint of the film, when she comes physically crashing down onto her workbench strewn with stills from her last work — death by art.



Holly Zausner, *Unsettled Matter*, 2015. Single channel HD video, color + sound, TRT: 10:30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters.



Installation view, "Holly Zausner: *Unsettled Matter*," 2015. Courtesy of Postmasters

We cannot tell if the most spectacular special effect of *Unsettled Matter* is in fact the end of the artist. In *Unseen* (2007), her previous film, set in Berlin, her silent antagonist is a larger-than-life-sized rubber doll. This feminine and sculptural figure has appeared as a prop in many of Zausner's works over the years. It is burdensome and seems to provoke danger wherever the artist goes: in *Unseen* she is watched by a tiger and threatened by a nearby explosion. *Unsettled Matter* is more foreboding as the enemy is ever-present, and we get the inkling that it is somehow contained within our own act of spectation. Besides a sense of determination in her demeanor and gait, Zausner's primary emotion seems to be impatience and weariness. At one point the artist, wearing sunglasses indoors, drinks a pint and takes a brief respite from her perambulations — giving us a moment to breathe as well.

If this film has a beginning or an end, it is a tale of escape and alienation, and of the artist's lonely practice, which, it would seem, always ends badly — the tense lines that support, very literally, this floating life, can give away at any moment. But such a linear narrative to *Unsettled Matter* is a bit too easy, and Zausner inlays the very simple activities of the film — walking and looking — with a few brief supernatural gestures that lead us to understand that we may disbelieve our eyes at any moment — this is the stuff of metaphor. The mystical details also become more apparent after watching the piece again, when we are half-expecting them and the suspense is much stronger. This is another indication that there is a rhythmic and endless cycle at play. Zausner briefly communes with the pharaoh Hatshepsut, then while admiring a tomb in the Metropolitan Museum, she departs, leaving her reflection standing there a few seconds too long. Similarly weird is a passage in the Strand, in which all the titles are inverted — a mirror of a mirror. Zausner also moves in slow-mo and speeds up until she becomes a blur. Despite these visual sleights-of-hand, the superb sound always keeps us aware of her steps, clack-clacking on the pavement.



Holly Zausner, *Unsettled Matter*, 2015. Single channel HD video, color + sound, TRT: 10:30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters.

Unsettled Matter seems most likely to be a dream, and a rejection of time. Unlike *Unseen*, which was decidedly tragic — the artist weighed down by her life, her choice, her femininity and her art — here she eludes us, traipsing through memories of past and future alike. She flits and stomps through the city, which is all hers, coldly regards the hysterical Monica Vitti in *L'Avventura*, and moves on, and keeps us a sympathetic but bewildered spectator, hustling to keep up.