

# The Producers

*Inspired by a variety of films and television shows, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy make playful multimedia works that tap into a collective pop-culture nostalgia.*

**BY STEPHANIE CASH**

Once upon a time TV and movies didn't exist. It was a very dark time indeed. It's hard to imagine what type of works artists like Jennifer and Kevin McCoy might have made back then. The husband-and-wife team seems to have a profound love of all manner of flickering, moving images, from animation to slasher films to arthouse classics. The duo has found various ways to dissect, reenact, scrutinize and categorize TV shows and films, in works that are as captivating as Saturday morning cartoons are to kids.

Most of us grew up with television; some would even say they were raised by it. Depending on one's inclination, it's either visual comfort food or a paltry diet of populist pabulum. Whether you love it or hate it or find guilty pleasure in it, TV is as vital to cultural life as literature, theater and opera were in pre-Edison times, and perhaps no artists have embraced it more fully than the McCoyes. Accordingly, the pair also seems to understand the notion of the "MTV attention span." Unlike many videos and film-based works, theirs don't require long, dedicated viewing sessions. Viewers can pretty quickly get what they're about, but, lured to the screens like June bugs to a streetlight, most stick around and watch for a while anyway.

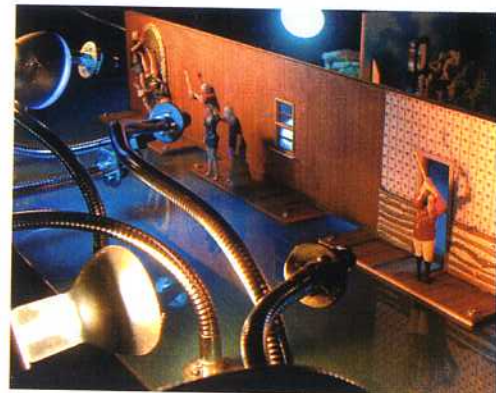
In "We Like to Watch," their 2002 show at Postmasters gallery in New York, the McCoyes took television shows and movies as their inspiration, but you don't have to be well-schooled in the subject matter to appreciate the works. The couple analyzed and codified such popular 1970s programs as "Starsky and Hutch," "Kung Fu" and "Eight Is Enough" with the thoroughness of a "CSI" coroner, extracting similar scenes and montaging them together to draw attention to filmic structure and narrative devices. Some of the works come packaged in metal suitcases fitted with a small



Above, view of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's series "Soft Rains," 2003, mixed-medium sculptures with electronics and video output; at Postmasters.

Right, top and bottom, close-ups of Soft Rains VI (cabin), 2003.

Images this article courtesy Postmasters, New York.





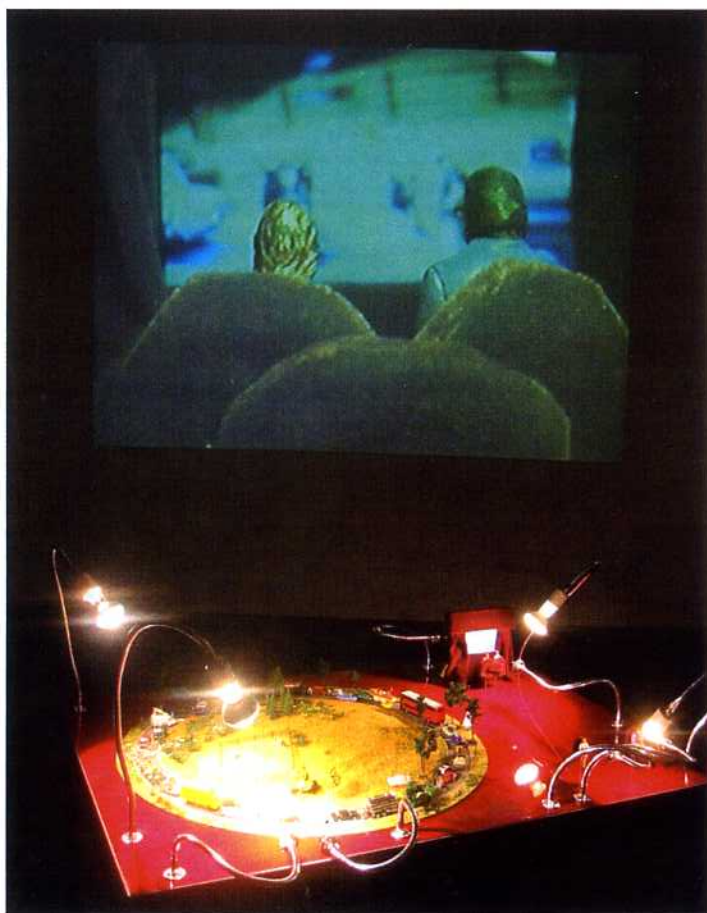




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monitor, a DVD player and sets of DVDs with such labels as (in the case of "Starsky and Hutch," for example) Every Zoom In, Every Yellow Volkswagen, Every Sexy Outfit, Every Moan of Pain, Every Track Out. "Kung Fu" lent itself to such lessons as How I Learned About Blocking Punches, How I Learned About Exploiting Workers, and How I Learned to Love the Land. And Looney Toons provided Every Anvil, Every Monster, Every Fall from a Great Height, Every Explosion, etc. The compression of violent incidents in the latter could be seen as evidence of a troubled society, were they not so comical.

In *Horror Chase* (2002), the McCoys constructed a stage set and hired an actor to re-create a scene from *Evil Dead 2* (1987), though only hard-core film fans might recognize the sequence. A man is seen running frantically through a meticulously reconstructed version of the house featured in the movie, looking back at the pursuing camera, wide-eyed and terrified. The video continuously loops and reverses, creating a nightmarish never-ending chase in which the man sometimes moves toward the camera in awkward lurching motions before again beating a hasty retreat. A similar technique was used in *The Kiss* (2002), in which looped footage of a couple's passionate kiss—based on one in *Body Heat* (1981)—results in a lip-chapping, marathon make-out scene. As in many of the McCoy's works, computers are used to randomly edit the footage, so that there are subtle alterations in sequence.



*View of Our Second Date, 2004, mixed-medium sculpture with electronics and video output, table 42 by 56 by 50 inches, projection dimensions variable; at Postmasters.*



*Detail of Soft Rains I (suburban home), 2003.*

In their recent Postmasters show, the duo presented "Soft Rains" (2003), a series of works focusing on films and filmmaking, and, in the back gallery, a work from a new series titled "Traffic" (all 2004). The main gallery contained seven platform sculptures—essentially tabletop-scale movie sets. Each tableau takes a movie genre as its theme: slasher, action/adventure, film noir, etc. Miniature figures, buildings, trees and other props—most of which are from a German model train company—are arranged on the tables like real film sets with fake and partial walls, and illogical layouts. The toy-like sets are surrounded by bright lights and tiny cameras mounted on flexible metal arms that loom over the scenes like predatory creatures. Soundtracks enhance the cinematic effect. Live feed from the cameras, controlled by a computer, creates the short narratives that were sequentially projected at a large scale on a wall in the darkened gallery. Each plot is conveyed in less than a minute using six to ten shots; the projection loops through all seven films in just over seven minutes. The title "Soft Rains" is a reference to Ray Bradbury's 1950 story "There Will Come Soft Rains" (inspired by Sara Teasdale's 1920 poem of the same name), in which an automated house continues to perform its functions after humans have been wiped out by a nuclear war. While it's easy to imagine these sculptures eerily reenacting their human dramas after our demise, the reference suggests a morose reading of an otherwise upbeat exhibition.

In one work, a sort of James Bond adventure takes place as black-clad masked gunmen scale large oil storage tanks, while divers are positioned in a boat offshore. An explosion is simulated by a flashing red light. For a foreign-film drama, two characters "stroll"—via a mechanized track—through a snow-dusted park; their conversation, in Italian, is borrowed from a Fellini film. The tonally muted sculpture appears on-screen as a black-and-white film. Other scenarios include a dinner party in a suburban home, a studio visit in an artist's downtown loft, a cabaret singer in a small-town bar, and an isolated rural cabin in which a fireside-frolicking couple gets butchered.

In their construction and presentation, the sculptures emphasize the artifice of filmmaking. The disparate scales of figures and buildings within the same platform are equalized by the camera, just as staging tricks are used to make real-life actors appear taller (or shorter) than in real life. Temporal sequence is manipulated as well. While scenes in real films are often shot out of order, later to be spliced together into a flowing storyline, all narrative elements and scenes exist simultaneously in the McCoys' works, like a parallel universe in a "Twilight Zone" episode. It's up to the cameras and computers to do the sequencing and create the illusion of time passing. To create different scenes with the same



character, the McCoys use multiple versions of a figurine with a variety of facial expressions or poses—sort of like stunt doubles. In the slasher sculpture, for example, the amorous lovers are seen under a blanket on the cabin floor in front of the fireplace. Their bloodied likenesses are attached, upright, to a freestanding wall; in the film, the macabre wall arrangement appears to be a post-rampage, overhead view of the floor. Along the same wall, there's also a full-length, ax-wielding figurine with arms upraised, and, for a close-up shot, a truncated version of the attacker tacked up nearby.

Seen in the back gallery at Postmasters, *Our Second Date* is from the "Traffic" series, the first installment of a larger project, "The Story of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy," in which the artists insert themselves into their works as observers—a layering of art imitating film imitating life, or some permutation thereof. Here the artists are seen at a screening of Godard's 1967 *Weekend*. The piece re-creates the film's traffic jam in the country, complete with cows, sheep, honking cars and buses, ambulances and crash victims. Mounted on a circular track, the bumper-to-bumper vehicles slowly rotate past cameras to create a panning effect of an endless traffic hell. In the large video projection, the "film" is interspersed with shots of seated figures—the McCoys—watching the movie. The artists altered and repainted four small figures in their own likenesses; two are seen from behind in velvet seats watching a miniature movie screen on which the film is playing, and two are positioned across the platform in front of a camera that provides close-ups of their faces.

Other works from the "Traffic" series (not on view at Postmasters) include the McCoys watching *Bonnie and Clyde* in a Texas bar, *Sugarland Express* in their home, and *American Graffiti* in a cardiac ward when Kevin was hospitalized with a heart problem. The "plot" in these works is as much about the McCoys watching the films as about the films themselves. It's a humorous and somewhat sentimental twist on their entire project.

Another new direction for the McCoys is site-specific work. For "Terminal 5," the ill-fated exhibition at New York's JFK airport that was shut down by the Port Authority because of damage to Eero Saarinen's landmarked building during the rowdy opening night party [see "Artworld," Dec. '04], they contributed *How We Met*, which played off the jet-age terminal's fantastic architecture and the experience (filmic or real) of air travel. Borrowing from Peter Bogdanovich's 1972 film *What's Up, Doc?*, starring Barbra Streisand, the comedic plot involves a stolen-bag caper interwoven with the true story of how the McCoys met in a Paris airport. A series of small platforms was attached to the handrail of one of Saarinen's staircases. On a freestanding plasma screen, live footage of the terminal was cleverly integrated with shots of the McCoys' reconstructed elements of the building—such as a diminutive revolving luggage carousel, ticket counter and passenger pick-up area. In better moments, the real and re-created spaces seemed to merge. (Though there are plans to show this work in other locations, the playful interaction with the spectacular Saarinen setting will be lost. Because of the show's abrupt clos-



Overview (above), close-up (left top) and screen captures (left, middle and bottom) from *How We Met*, 2004, mixed-medium sculpture with electronics and video output; in the "Terminal 5" exhibition at JFK Airport, New York.



ing, the work was not well documented in photographs, and relatively few people got to see it. I was not one of them.)

As our society spews out an endless stream of movies and TV shows, the McCoys will certainly never lack for material. Though numerous artists have used TV or films in engaging and provocative works—from the clever editing and manipulations of Christian Marclay, Paul Pfeiffer, Douglas Gordon and Omer Fast to Mark Bennett's imaginative renderings of the floor plans of TV sitcom houses—it's the McCoys' unabashed delight in their media, as a means and a happy end in itself, that makes their work so irresistible. □

"Soft Rains" was seen at the FACT Centre (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool, and Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, before appearing at Postmasters in New York [May 1-June 12, 2004]. Examples from the "Traffic" series were included in "Zone of Confluences" at the Villette Numérique festival of digital media culture in Paris [Sept. 21-Oct. 3, 2004]. The McCoys were included in the recent SITE Santa Fe biennial [July 18, 2004-Jan. 9, 2005] and are in the traveling exhibition "Cut/Film as Found Object," which debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami [Nov. 13, 2004-Jan. 30, 2005], and travels to the Milwaukee Art Museum [June 25-Sept. 25] and the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa [Jan. 22-Mar. 26, 2006]. *How We Met* appeared in the short-lived "Terminal 5" at JFK Airport in New York, Oct. 1-6. New work will be on view at Galleria 1000 Eventi, Milan, May 4-July 25.