

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.

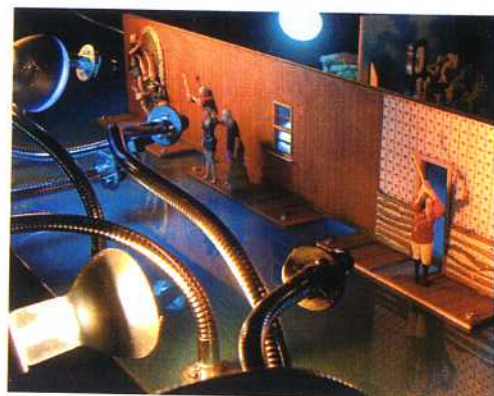
In "We Like to Watch," their 2002 show at Postmasters gallery in New York, the McCoyes took television shows and movies as their inspiration, but you don't have to be well-schooled in the subject matter to appreciate the works. The couple analyzed and codified such popular 1970s programs as "Starsky 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.





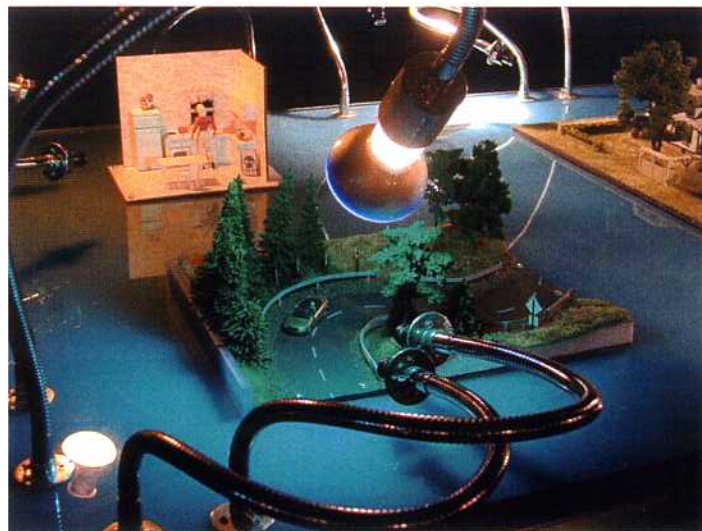
To create different scenes with the same character, the McCoys use multiple versions of a figurine with a variety of expressions or poses.

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

