



## Aernout Mik: Vacuum Room

MC Gallery

23 AUGUST - 22 OCTOBER

Maybe Aernout Mik intended the title of his latest video installation, *Vacuum Room* (2005), to describe what takes place not only in the room depicted in the video, but also in the gallery itself. Given that his works are always specific combinations of video, architecture and sculpture, it is probably deliberate that this work ultimately sucks the life out of the room. While other works of his have made me feel intoxicated, even breathless, in a weirdly and incrementally intensifying manner, the lack of atmosphere in *Vacuum Room* had me wondering if I didn't lose a few brain cells while in it.

Most of this effect can be pinned upon what happens in the videos, which in trademark Mik fashion are presented on six screens that rest on the floor and are set next to each other into a low, irregularly curved wall that creates a kind of video 'pen' in the centre of the gallery (as usual, you can walk around the outside of the pen and observe all of the equipment and building materials required to create the installation). The videos have been trained upon some type of council meeting room, and they present the activity of the room as if it were being merely recorded by surveillance cameras, an effect that is reinforced by the way in which the different views from each camera jump around all of the screens, and by the lack of any audio. No soundtrack, of course, helps

maintain the confusion about what is happening.

I know that I still haven't described the specific action of the work. This is because the more I think about it, the more it kills the piece for me. The underlying premise - some type of official meeting held by stereotypically 'European' participants that is disrupted by a spontaneous protest made up of young people who don't fit the typecasting - has a lot of potential and, to his credit, Mik does include (or at least allow for) a lot of diverse and often inexplicable action that adds to a meaningful sense of disconnectedness: for example, when the 'officials' are arguing with each other (it's not clear whether the 'students' have left or not yet entered) many of them are waving half-blue, half-red cards at each other that abstractly spoof rigid political positions; and one of the protestors perversely breaks an egg over a small statue and massages it onto its surface. Mik lost me, however, when several of the male protestors sit down on the floor, lean against the wraparound desk of the room and pull their shirts over their heads. While obviously a chilling image because of its all-too-timely associational specificity (the shirts become hoods), for me it deflated all of the hallucinatory buoyancy I've found before in Mik's work, and I'm still left with the thought that this lack of flexibility actually makes the work less political. TRM

## Brides of Frankenstein

San Jose Museum of Art

31 JULY - 30 OCTOBER

It's rare to walk into a show nowadays that advertises itself with phrases like 'digital art' and 'new media' and feel that you're actually learning something about our age, or getting a feel for the tones and structures available to artists right now. Thanks to Marcia Tanner's curatorial shrewdness, however, *Brides of Frankenstein* manages to offer both those experiences: each of the artists represented has a bit of Mary Shelley in her and explores how innovation carries the potential both to enhance and to threaten our lives.

One such threat of innovation comes from its tendency to displace its own best breakthroughs. Although Tanner includes some up-to-the moment installations by artists like Heidi Kumao and Gail Wight, some of the most striking pieces in the show date from a few years ago. In a genre of art that seems to move at rocket speed, it's refreshing to see such works culled for their strength and nuance and not just their quicksilver topicality.

Kristin Lucas's video, *Involuntary Reception* (2000), for instance, has a wonderfully oddball, sci-fi premise. A young woman, played by the artist herself, has been invaded by electrical forces. She's become both the victim of this excess voltage and an almost Delphic 'transmitter'. We see her on split screens, each of which cuts intermittently to a sequence of other images. Her monologue patches in and out: 'What can I say? ... I'm receiving all kinds of signals all the time ... sonar, radar, electromagnetic...' Much of the thrill of the video comes from Lucas's comic gift and her mingling of wry humour with genuine pathos. At one point, while an image of schooling koi fills one screen, and as the character speaks of the difficulty of vacationing in her new electrical state, she states in perfect deadpan, 'Swimming's a problem.' As the film progresses, the anonymous woman becomes a cipher for any individual's isolation and engagement, for any person's attempts to navigate the gaps of static between the self and the world. Despite the seemingly affectless tenor of the monologue, Lucas proves herself a master tonalist. The deadpan offers her a base from which she can produce a subtle gradation of tones, from satirical to sincere, from melancholic to awestruck.

Certainly the most impressive of the better-known artists represented

is Elizabeth King. On show here are photographs and a video of a jointed and movable sculpture called *Pupil* (1987-90), whom King has based on her own attributes and modelled out of porcelain, brass, Swiss pear-wood and glass. This sculpture may seem futuristic, yet it returns us to the most ancient questions about what it means to be human. In the video *What Happened* (1991), made in collaboration with Richard Kizu-Blair, she shows us exactly how our faces roll upward as we smell, how our fingers and eyes move in delicate tandem as we sense objects in front of us, how our eyes flit across a surface as we try to read the images before us. By asking her viewers to reconsider these specific technical operations of the body itself, King exposes the force that summons all the constituent parts into motion. Her entire project seems an attempt to animate, a word that at its root means to give soul. That may sound vague or sentimental, but King achieves her grand feat through exquisite attention to detail. You leave her work feeling you could see an insect move a mile away.

So often, work bearing the tag 'experimental art' amounts to little more than the repeated execution of a set idea. But, nothing could be further from the methods of the best artists in *Brides of Frankenstein*. Tanner has selected not necessarily the newest of the new, but the best of the new. These genuine experimenters bring the viewer to a place where uncertainty traffics with wonder. They employ their new methods and materials not to advertize their own innovation, but to reactivate our curiosity. Is it significant that all of these artists are women? Maybe not. But even considered as a small survey of art in mixed media, this exhibition seems to show us the better half. PC

