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Attention Span

TOM HOLERT ON THE ART OF OMER FAST

ENTERING A PITCH-BLACK BASEMENT GALLERY at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (MUMOK) this past fall, visitors encountered two screens suspended from the ceiling, seeming to hover in midair. Though facing the same direction, the screens were on different planes, one set back roughly eighteen inches from the other. This gap engendered a peculiar spatial rhythm while also underscoring the confounding internal disjunctions of the work the screens were part of—Omer Fast's video installation *The Casting*, 2007.

The Casting is a visual feast of gory detail, charged expressivity, and compositional elegance, encompassing shots of US soldiers on patrol in a Humvee, a beautiful red-haired woman, Iraqi civilians on a roadside, a GI shooting, a screaming woman in a chador, a Bavarian townscape, a nightclub, a female arm scored with numerous cuts, a film crew in a studio, a landing strip at night. And yet for all the sheer cinematic splendor—the elaborate choreography, the hyperrealist polish—there is an intense strangeness as well. True, it's unclear how all of these shots are connected to one another, but many contemporary viewers will take such fractured narrativity in stride. What is really unsettling is the fact that the images inhabit a liminal space between stasis and animation. The actors are motionless, almost frozen, so that it seems at first as if one is looking at a series of stills. But then an occasional tracking shot, fabric or smoke billowing in the wind, a bird crossing a wintry sky, or, most startlingly, eyes blinking in an otherwise impassive face indicate that these are *moving* images. With growing discomfiture, the viewer of *The Casting* is forced to confront the question not only of what these pictures *show* but, more pressingly, of what these pictures *are*. Whatever narratives its imagery suggests, in other words, *The Casting* forces one into an ontological quandary.

