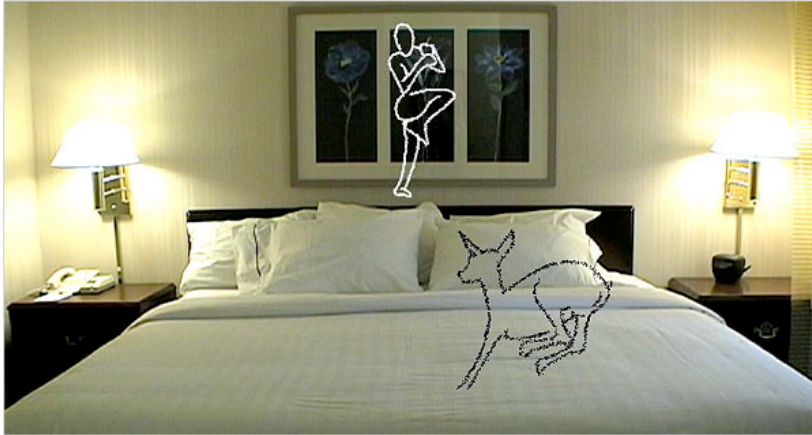


ART REVIEW

Hotel Rooms Set the Scene, and 45 Artists Star



A video still from Marina Zurkow's "Perhappiness" (2006).

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
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Several years ago I asked Denise Markonish, the former curator of ArtSpace in New Haven, whether she had ever collaborated on a project with other contemporary art museums in [Connecticut](#). It was a casual question that I had since forgotten — until I saw it repeated in the opening pages of the catalog for “50,000 Beds,” a joint exhibition by ArtSpace, Real Art Ways in Hartford and the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Ridgefield. “The answer then was ‘No,’” the catalog said; “now, nearly five years later, the answer is ‘And how!’ ”

Short clips of other films from the exhibit “50,000 Beds: A Project by Chris Doyle”.

- "Thank You For Not Smoking"
- "My Secret Smile"
- "The Invisible Hand"
- "Kegel Exercise"
- "Gioconda"
- "CART RAID"
- "Room 863"

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Though my question may have lived on, I had absolutely nothing to do with the current answer. That credit belongs to Chris Doyle, an artist asked by the participating organizations in 2005 to come up with a concept that could encompass all three spaces. In scope, theme and vision, Mr. Doyle’s proposal was compelling — he wanted to turn loose a large group of artists in hotel rooms across the state to make video artworks. The exhibition “50,000 Beds,” consisting of 45 video artworks spread across three art spaces, was born, the title coming from the purported number of hotel-room beds across the state.

Although the artists put their own personal stamp on their videos, employing a range of techniques and responses from invented fiction to documentary, the focus is the hotel room — a place rich with narrative and dramatic potential, a space of intimacy, but also of anonymity and fantasy.

Had Mr. Doyle simply conceived the project and then allowed it to unfold, that would have been interesting enough. But he went further. A multidisciplinary artist with a degree in fine arts and a master’s in architecture, he wanted the videos to be shown in specially designed structures at each of the three places. The idea was to transform white-box spaces into black boxes where he could simultaneously display 15 artworks each — a considerable technical challenge.

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At first, the works seem to be randomly distributed among the spaces. But there are general groupings, bringing some thematic contrasts to the show. The videos at Real Art Ways feel more serious. Those at Artspace tend to be humorous and generally lighter, while those at the Aldrich often involve animation and are generally more abstract. But whatever the breakdown, the range of ideas and aesthetics is impressive.

At Real Art Ways and at the Aldrich, Mr. Doyle built elevated wooden ramps snaking around the inside of the spaces. They are a dramatic sight when you enter. But they also create discrete areas for the high and low display of the videos on the wall, and under the ramp. The structure also captures tacitly the sense of anonymity and intimacy of hotel

rooms — you are alone, but always aware of being surrounded by others.

The videos at Artspace are installed differently, arranged sequentially in a series of interlocking spaces divided by partitions. I didn't like this format very much, because you don't get an immediate sense of an overall installation. But this is a minor complaint, for the videos are the main draw — among them Nina Katchadourian's "Mystic Shark," in which the artist inserts shark's teeth into her own mouth, symbolically transforming herself into the predator.

High on my list of overall favorite videos is David Ellis's at the Aldrich. It documents him and a friend entering a hotel room with their luggage, sitting down on the bed and then staring in disbelief at the ugly landscape painting on the wall. It is a familiar scenario. But this time the artists are so unhappy with the painting that they take it off the wall, remove it from its frame and paint over it with a new image before putting it back on the wall. It is hilarious.

There are so many excellent videos worth mentioning, it is hard to avoid some tallying. Broken down by art space, these are the artists or artist teams whose works I feel were most successful. At Artspace, Moyra Davey and Jason Simon, John Pilson, Melissa Friedling, Chris Wilcha and Eve Sussman. At Real Art Ways, Shannon Plumb, Liz Cohen, Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry, Megan Michalak and Erika Van Natta. At the Aldrich, Laurel Nakadate, Brent Green, Marina Zurkow and Dread Scott.

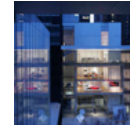
Some of these artists are well known, having exhibited regularly and to positive notice in New York. But what is heartening is the participation of many relatively new artists, including about one-third who live and work in Connecticut. Among the local talents is Ms. Van Natta, whose video "By the Hour" documents the re-creation of a photograph for a sleazy hotel's advertising flier showing a couple sipping Champagne on a bed and in a heart-shaped Jacuzzi. The footage has the look and feel of a pornographic film set, specifically the opening minutes in which buffed models in bathrobes and bikinis have their hair and makeup done before hopping into the hot tub.

Other videos are poignant, like Mr. Wilcha's interview in a Stratford hotel room with his father, a business traveler with a compulsion to collect hotel room soaps and shampoos. It is a story about obsession, but at the same time touches on an aspect of human nature common to us all. I can't think of a better metaphor for this show.

"50,000 Beds: A Project by Chris Doyle," Artspace, 50 Orange Street, New Haven, through Sept. 15; (203) 772-2709 or artspacenh.org; Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor Street, Hartford, through Sept. 23; (860) 232-1006 or realartways.org; the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Sept. 3; (203) 438-4519 or aldrichart.org.

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