



"Multiplex" opens at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn



Shannon Plumb  
*How To*  
2002  
at Smack Mellon



Julian Stark  
*The 12 Labors of Hercules* (2002)  
at Smack Mellon



Chris Sollars  
from *Bjorn Again* (2003)  
at Smack Mellon

There's nothing wrong with exhibiting video in a gallery, but it's usually a mistake to present a video monitor as if it were a painting or sculpture. The static image is well served by the "white cube" of the contemporary exhibition space, where it is isolated from the hurly-burly of real time. We don't stand in front of a painting waiting for something to happen. It's happening for us, or we move on. But video makes different demands on the viewer's time. Having reached a certain age, the conventions of its presentation are ready for a rethink.

Two current shows at venerable Brooklyn alternative spaces devise new paradigms for the exhibition of video: "Multiplex" at Smack Mellon in Dumbo, Jan 24-Mar. 7, 2004, and "Video X" at Momenta Art in Williamsburg, Jan. 23-Feb. 23, 2004.

Founded in 1995 and directed since 2000 by Kathleen Gilrain, Smack Mellon is currently the best reason for gallery-goers to visit the Dumbo area. Recent memorable shows there include "Big Cry Baby," a very personal selection of works by Jerry Kearns, and last spring's "Custom Fit," site-specific works curated by Gilrain herself. With "Multiplex," Gilrain and her co-curator, the artist (and 2004 Whitney Biennial pick) Eve Sussman, have put together an eclectic, energetic group of videos that share an interest in cinematic genre.

With the assistance of Chris Doyle, they have outfitted the gallery's darkened, cavernous interior with a complex of ramps, platforms and viewing areas which allow the visitor to drift easily from one screen or monitor to another. Three or four movie-house chairs face each screen (many of which are wall-sized) and headphones are provided for those who don't want to miss a word. It is a spectacular environment; from any vantage point several screens are visible, generating random combinations of disparate imagery. The pieces themselves range in mode from impressionistic (Neil Goldberg's eight-minute loop of pedestrians' bobbing heads seen through a telephoto lens) to narrative, with some of the most memorable mining a comic vein.

Particularly winning is Shannon Plumb's *How To* (2002, 35 min.), in which a slightly unhinged housewife in robe and curlers seems to be sampling the private domestic habits of others, as recorded in voice-overs, as if she herself has distinctly not enough to do. The activities range from matters of personal hygiene to devotional practices to cooking preparations, and the woman onscreen reenacts them for the camera in flickering, speedy low-resolution, with a mix of vulnerability and tenaciousness. Plumb's riff on the instructional film is a product of her tenure at Smack Mellon's Artist Studio Program, a one-year residency program founded by Gilrain in 2000.

Julian Stark amusingly sends up the classical epic in *The 12 Labors of Hercules* (2002, 13 min.). The Greek god's punishment for killing his family after his mom drove him insane, the Labors have many details that are still disputed by scholars -- allowing the narrative leeway this project revels in. Low-budget with a vengeance, Stark's Hercules wrestles the Cretan Bull -- actually a vintage Dodge Diplomat outfitted with a longhorn hood ornament -- and signals his victory by flicking on the bull's hazard lights and opening the hood. A flock of pigeons outside the American Museum of Natural History stand in for those pesky Stympalian Birds, while Cerberus, the hound that guards the gates of Hades, is played by a camera-shy Chihuahua with a ghostly stare.

Sports broadcasting is the media reference point in *Bjorn Again* (2003) by Chris Sollars, in which tennis great Bjorn Borg appears to be engaged in a televised match against his feminine side -- and she kicks his ass. The artist, who convincingly resembles Borg in a skirt, has spliced himself into 58 minutes of footage, a hypothetical jump-cutting technique that is also used effectively by Javier Cambre in his video *Contempt* (recently on view at starsixtyseven), where he seamlessly stars opposite Brigitte Bardot in the classic Godard film.

Sollars, not so concerned with continuity, is much more upfront about the element of fantasy fulfillment, and the slacker-living-room set we enter to view the piece (on a vintage TV) is adorned with the attributes of late-'70s High Blonde culture: posters of Farrah Fawcett and Bo Derek, stacks of *Playboy* magazine and even period snacks. Not the one-liner it appears at first to be, this work has an oddly melancholy air in its exploration of sexual identity and sports fandom.