Cauleen Smith

NTSC

Women & Their Work

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Austin, Texas
DO U DREAM IN BLACK AND WHITE OR DO U DO IT IN COLOUR? *(sic*)

Cauleen Smith ‘NTSC 1-5’

During the Great Depression, film icon Robert Mitchum was a rough and tumble boxcar hobo kind of guy. When he decided to start a family and go on the straight and narrow, he settled on a career in Hollywood — but only because he caught a nervous breakdown working a regular day-job as a machinist.

In 1955’s *Night of the Hunter* — generally recognized as Mitchum’s finest performance — Mitchum’s ex-con, religious fanatic, serial killer Harry Powell pretends to be a jackleg preacher so his old cellmate’s family will take him into their trust. His game is to find stolen money that he knows the cellmate hid in the house. Well, part of his game as the Powell character isn’t just as a con-artist but a misogynistic Jesus freak who marries and kills women out of a belief that desire turns women into heathen temptresses. In the film’s most famous scene, Powell uses his hands as props to mime the eternal struggle between love and hate, the letters having been seen earlier actually block-printed across his fingers. On the surface, the film seems to be about the corruption of innocence, but like Mitchum’s own life, it begs to be read as an aggressive and oblique critique of the illusion of conformity and our illusions thereof.

The acronym NTSC (for National Television System Committee) has also become a euphemism for the technology created to standardize analog color television transmissions and videotape. The inexorable age of digital television, already well upon us, means that the hoary NTSC standard, (known to most by the familiar sight of those screen-filling color-bars that mark a non-broadcasting channel) will be phased out in 2009. Critics of the ancient system joked that it meant “Never The Same Color,” a slap at the system’s dysfunctional and a likely unintended recognition of all the colored things in the world television just never seems to get right. (The story of getting the NTSC formula right is itself a tale of corporate intrigue and skulduggery worthy of a John Le Carre novel.)

Cauleen Smith’s video series *NTSC 1-5*, like much of her work, is concerned with glitches in perception and expectation — the way things, stories, people refuse to scan, to play out as we expect them to. The works were created while Smith was doing a residency at the Skowhegan artist’s colony. There she found herself out of her comfort zone as a pro-film stock narrative filmmaker, and suddenly forced to commit to working within the limitations of the colony’s available video technology. On one hand, *NTSC* is a bold acknowledgement by Smith of video as an aesthetic compromise; on another it’s a testament to her need to push herself and create thoughtful work regardless of what tools may be at hand. *NTSC*’s framing of TV screens and videotaped black and white film footage surrounded by Smith’s paintings of grids and color bars in the series confronts the limited palette of representations broadcast TV provides. It also denotes why the 16,000 colors the NTSC system allegedly allowed aren’t versatile enough for anyone who feels their own imagination (and actual life) to be more engaging and colorful than whatever’s on the telly. Smith constructs a box to examine the box and critique the lame choices it offers. Magic 8-Balls come to play a major role in her critical toolkit here.

The reductive binary powers of prophecy attributed to Magic 8-Ball toys almost demand to be read here as a metaphor for current simplistic American foreign policy in the post 9/11 era. In a time when we’re asked to believe the US is in Iraq because God told the President, many citizens have felt political discourse to have slipped the bounds of rationality and entered the realm of the supernatural, beyond reproach or appeal. Smith compels us to understand that *Night of the Hunter*’s psycho-fundamentalist twisted logic around sin, sex, female bodies, and scripture-approved mass murder is as old as the Spanish Inquisition and as topical as Abu Ghraib.
In Night of the Hunter, Mitchum’s Powell projects and represses his own thinly-veiled lust upon his victim-wives. The artist, using the film as backdrop and counterpoint, unveils a personal story of sexual misapprehension—a confessional tale about an almost one-night stand where too much beer transformed hot sexual expectations into abject exhaustion and body heat into bodily folly. We’ve all been there but Smith generously, unashamedly leaves us with an erotic image of transfiguration—during rough foreplay we’re told her hand found her thrashing lust object’s cock, calmed his physical frenzy, eliciting 3 soft whimpers that affirmed an earlier fantasy of herself as desired by this stranger. It’s as neat and sublime a bit of intertextual mapping as Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman, though Smith makes it clear that she’ll take her sexual agency over the sexual frustration of the ‘50s Hollywood model any day. Having wrapped up her own constructions of desire and gender in a bow, Smith then proceeds to NTSC’s coda where she rejigs two questions posed in earlier title sequences: “What’s your favorite color?” and “Are you aware of social constructions in your life?” Now she asks them not for the spectator’s pleasure but of her fellow Skowhegan-residency captives. Smith coyly adopts and trains a decoy, a white male child, to interrogate her compadres, a gesture which seems to both disarm the diverse group of folk approached and give them license to answer her loaded questions with as much levity, lasciviousness or gravitas as they like.

That Smith manages to obliquely address the dead wood of American identity politics with whimsy and parlor games rather than a visual protest rhetoric speaks volumes about her bent towards complicating and restructing the surface of American selfhood—a playground now littered with so many mounds of cultural detritus that would have overwhelmed even as dedicated an American trash collector-connoisseur as Andy Warhol. In NTSC, Smith recreates the game room/garbage heap of signifiers at play in the national psyche, understanding that our gossip and geopolitics have both become games of chance, investments in a global Vegas of random outcomes, structures built on a chaos theory that bolsters and refuses American exceptionalism in the same breath—a world where bad things, like media-bombing, can happen to anybody, American or not. The data-saturated level playing field we all live on now is one where the only winner can be the cash-machine ringing, ravenous scanners of our media servers—American culture’s own ministries of disinformation, whose grasp of the national attention span for consensual hallucination is matched only by their hope to one-day commodify all human thought. Count Smith among those who refuse to allow the mainstreaming and mall-ification of our neural pathways to go unchallenged.

Gregory Stephen Tate

Greg Tate is a writer and musician who lives and thrives in Harlem. He is currently working on a book about the Godfather of Soul, James Brown. Tate also directs the 20-member conducted improvisation ensemble Burnt Sugar, The Arkestra Chamber. The group has released 15 albums on their own TRUGROID imprint since 1999.
This Panel: Video stills from *NTSC #1: LOVE/HATE*, 2007. Video.
Women & Their Work

Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 29th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater; music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,794 artists in 250 visual art exhibitions, 107 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 339 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.

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