

Belgian artist Op de Beeck conceptualizes cityscapes on a small scale

Advertisement

By Jason Edward Kaufman
Special to The Washington Post
Friday, January 21, 2011; 2:07 PM

Conceptual artists have a major problem: They strive to get people thinking about certain ideas, but art about ideas is often dry and joyless. Who wants the visual equivalent of a sociology lecture? We want to learn, but we also want to be dazzled by virtuosity, emotionally moved, or at least amused.

A Belgian artist's video at the Hirshhorn Museum - the [latest in its "Black Box" exhibitions](#) of new-media works from around the world - seeks a middle ground. It takes an intellectual and philosophical point and dramatizes it in a mildly diverting way. The concept has to do with how images that we take for granted in movies, TV shows and other media are for the most part artificial constructions, yet we treat them as if they were real. This is well-traveled terrain, not only for conceptual artists but for everyone from French philosophers to Hollywood. It would take some serious talent to break new ground here. "Staging Silence" (2009) by Hans Op de Beeck doesn't get there, but it provides a pleasant entertainment.

The 22-minute black-and-white projection shows a series of dollhouse-size sets being constructed and taken apart by arms and hands that enter the camera frame from the sides. The model builders - the artist and his studio assistant - take turns placing thermos bottles, stacks of glass ashtrays, books and other objects into the frame, then they add a row of miniature electric streetlamps, dim the room lights and suddenly - "magically" - the scene resembles a city at night.

Op de Beeck, 41, is underlining the artifice of it all, making fun of our tendency to read the setups as real places. Indeed, his jury-rigged renderings have a do-it-yourself quality reminiscent of high school science or theater projects. (Had he wanted more precise renderings of buildings and landscapes, he could have hired architectural model makers or model-train enthusiasts.) His cinematography also is rudimentary: The camera remains stationary as the action unfolds, and the only editing consists of dissolves that connect one shot to the next.

Piece by piece, the components come together to make about a dozen scenarios, including a proscenium stage, a formal garden, an office, an airport waiting area, a hospital ward and so on. Throughout there is a melodramatic mood that mimics the loneliness and foreboding of film noir and the otherworldly shtick of David Lynch or Stephen King. Many of the images suggest settings from classic films - the garden scene reminded me of "Last Year at Marienbad," and a barren heath brought to mind "Frankenstein" or "Great Expectations." But there are no characters - no figures or movement at all other than the manipulating hands, modulating light and occasional drifts of foglike cigarette smoke.

Op de Beeck, an artist better known in Europe than in the United States, where he has shown only sporadically in New York galleries, has explored this somber nocturnal territory in various media. In addition to videos, he makes accomplished black-and-white watercolors mainly of bleak scenes similar to those in "Staging Silence."

He also writes short stories, such as one that he used as the voice-over of a darkling video, in which the narrator empathizes with a friend who has committed suicide.

In "Staging Silence," however, the melancholy is relieved by humor. In the garden scene, for example, a fountain placed in the foreground is activated with water poured from a pitcher. Later what looks like a multi-

story palace is revealed to be a cake when the artist cuts out slices and puts them on plates. The audience titters with delight.

Despite its overt amateurism - perhaps, in part, because of it - there is something engaging about the continuous transformation as sets are created and dismantled. It's enjoyable to evaluate how well each image fools the eye, and every time a scene coalesces there is a kind of "ta-da" moment.

And a nice touch is the accompanying electronic music composed and performed by Serge Lacroix. This soundscape, which was inspired by the images, starts with a few isolated tones that increase in number, building in complexity and layers much as the sets come together part by part. The drifting soundtrack creates an atmosphere of tinkering and meandering that animates and enhances the viewing experience.

But "Staging Silence" is not a work of deeply moving sentiment; nor is it a trenchant examination of the changing nature of human perception and experience in the cinematic or digital age. The video's child-friendly dabbling with big ideas can seem cloyingly cute.

"It's enchantment that beckons the viewer's imagination," says Kelly Gordon, the Hirshhorn curator who has overseen the "Black Box" program since it began in 2005. That's about right. Op de Beeck may have more than low-wattage entertainment in mind, but "Staging Silence" still remains little more than a soothing, innocuous diversion.

Kaufman is a freelance writer.

Black Box: Hans Op de Beeck runs through March 27 at the Hirshhorn Museum, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW. Call 202-633-1000 or visit hirshhorn.si.edu.

© 2011 The Washington Post Company