

## WHITE NIGHTS DARK DREAMS

Bohdan Stehlik / Una Szeemann

11 October - 07 December 2008

Opening\_Saturday 11 october 2008 at 5-30 pm

Hours\_Fri-Sat-Sun 2.00-6.00 p.m. (or by appointment)

The series of 68 black and white photographs of various dimensions entitled **DARK MOVIES** (2007) in room 1 opens the personal show of **BOHDAN STEHLIK and UNA SZEEMANN** (1973, 1975) at the CACT Centre of Contemporary Art in Canton Ticino. Hung randomly in the first room, like an accumulation of crazily dancing still shots, this work comprises a veritable introduction to the exhibition's theme, but also the exemplary, successful genesis of the work done by this artistic duo since they got together in about 2006. **DARK MOVIES** actually provides the interpretative key that automatically opens the doors to all the rooms in the exhibition, a key around which Stehlik and Szeemann decided to develop a joint effort that questions artistic languages from a point of view both of theme and of semiology. Pairing with the 68 photographs are 68 titles of international masterpieces of the silver screen, from which the artists drew their inspiration, for each of them reconstituting the set of a scene, inserting the film's characters, skilfully reproduced by the artists in plasticine, in the sets. Black and white is used as a mnemonic element of classical film. The result is a highly symbolic reconstruction that can be traced back to today's bipolar Situationism, suspended midway between reality and dream, between reality and truth, intended as the awareness of a life that has not been consumed by experience: the timeless gap that we find in Bohdan Stehlik's previous work, in unison with Una Szeemann's quest for historical certainty [which we also find, for example, in earlier film works such as **MONTEWOOD HOLLYVERITA'** (2003)] and a sort of evanescent reinterpretation and relationship with the real world.

There is a certain tragic splendour to the 6'40" video on three synchronised channels entitled **FADED MAJESTY** (2007) screened in room 2. Maybe ironically, but not without moments of considerable pathos, it reiterates the backdrop of a typically Western world and thought. The locations are bathed in a shadowy light, indicating the sense of abandonment and perdition of man who has broken free of the steady, reassuring march of time; otherness is expressed by the presence of white deer, the sole, vivid surviving truth in a world abandoned by humanity and by its

vain progress. The force and grace expressed by these survivors of evolutionism emanate all the more splendour, the more extraordinary is their uniqueness and their regal, fantastic otherness compared to the world, to the model and to customary habit; to the concept of categorisation that here gradually sheds all historical and trivially societal meaning. In a post-industrial, technological fabric, where the concepts of beauty, surfeit, aestheticisation and dictatorship of the object with the certainties, of the machine for its own sake, this is where Stehlik and Szeemann's deer acquire a visionary as well as a realistic dimension. Uttering a warning, a silent, strangled cry, like in a fairy story, they take the observer back inside a dreamy potentiality, occupying a space somewhere between dream and reality, between beauty and tragedy, between modernity and tradition in vanity: between the force of life and the awareness of death.

In room 3, visitors can see the interactive installation work **UNTITLED** (2008), whose signal dimension is sheer simplicity. A series of plaster balloons strung at random from the ceiling: an installation that manifests its strength in terms not of the already mentioned simplicity of its linguistic media, but of the expression of antagonism between two opposing concepts; inside and outside, lightness and oppression, reality and escapism, before and after, reality and pretence. The discourse unfolds here around a dramatic suspension in time, whose purpose is to celebrate an unhealthy, lethal world of illusions and missed Utopias, of microscopic childish dreams. So once again Stehlik and Szeemann work to superimpose and blend their reciprocal topics of research, in such a way that the deep, obscure (auto)biographical aspects of which I am so fond come to the surface.

**NEVER EVEN** (2008), screened in room 4, is an HD video made entirely in Rome, the eternal city, the cradle of European civilisation and of a humanity that never dies, because it is forever starting all over again, forever ceaselessly. And the same goes for this video, which is edited without any apparent beginning and end. Once again, the benchmarks of style refer to film [vaguely to horror films, because of the sense of pathos that is generated here, the cuts, the fine photography, the editing and its suspensions in time], where the two characters a young woman and a mature man [father and daughter?] wander around the capital, strangely pursuing one another; we could surmise that this is a victim and her assassin, pursuing the female figure to the point of her hypothetical strangling. Hypothetical, as the death of the young woman, who never actually appears to die, is an enigma for observers to solve in the process of making their interpretations. The references to thrillers, a tangible sense of suspense in the sequence of the narrative and an intelligent descriptive soundtrack (Domenico Ferrari) make this video intriguing from the point of view of a psychological crossword puzzle, without neglecting the usual references to relations with history [the male character's almost paternal figure, supported by a latent sense of nostalgia],

The logo consists of the letters 'CVGT' in a bold, stylized, blocky font. The 'C' is solid black, while the 'V', 'G', and 'T' are white with a thick black outline. The letters are closely spaced and have a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance.

the relationship between reality and pretence, between dream and hallucination, in the scope of an extenuating description of pernicious conflict.

The series of smaller works entitled **INVITED NEVER TO RETURN** (2008) in room 5 is actually a collage of overlapping photographic images of swans, torn roughly from their origins and pasted onto other photographic backgrounds, whose themes conjure up scenarios of war and of urban guerrilla warfare. The end of human civilisation, which confronts the two swans symbolically signifying the indissoluble, pure love between two living beings leaves no doubt whatsoever about the vision of the future. The act of Love represented by the animals is a mirage, supported among other things by the technique of colour photography; a simple shift to the tone of sepia. A pale grey of hope; a drop in the ocean of Dionysiac, contemporary dynamism.

Mario Casanova\_2008 [translation Pete Kercher]

