

<http://www.straight.com/article/ruth-beer-scenes-unseen?#>

Ruth Beer: Scenes Unseen

By Robin Laurence

Publish Date: August 10, 2006

At the Western Front until Saturday, August 12

Mystery confronts banality in Ruth Beer's new mixed-media installation. The materials employed, the images gathered, the objects and settings depicted—all suggest a kind of institutional utility, an unadorned dailiness. Yet the actions that occur here, and the relationships of the work's various parts to each other and to the whole, are charged with complex and unsettling meaning.

Scenes Unseen comprises two video projections at right angles to each other, a still photograph, and a lighted sculpture angled toward the back of the gallery. The video elements are unusual for this mid-career Vancouver-based artist, who made her reputation as a sculptor. However, a little time in their presence reveals an enduring sculptural preoccupation: spatial relations. Beer's carefully orchestrated series of repetitive actions and recurring forms and motifs marry the installation's two- and three-dimensional elements.

The artist explores the nature of our physical relationship to objects. At the same time, the performances enacted in the videos describe other aspects of our interconnection with the material world, calling up a crowd of cultural and psychological ideas. The two adjacent projections, each playing Beer's loop of six short videos, are unsynchronized, intentionally distracting the viewer, disrupting the scenarios, and disorienting us as to what is about to happen—or has happened already. The nature of human presence in the work, actual or fictional, is thrown into question.

At the beginning of each scene, an unmoving video camera focuses on a silent, still, unoccupied institutional space. The hallway, studio, AV room, and three very different offices—from orderly to chaotic—evoke their art-school setting. A tall, casually dressed woman, perhaps a student, walks matter-of-factly into each interior, clears away a few objects, folds herself into some

improbable negative space (a metal shelving unit, a corner cabinet, a low cupboard...), covers herself with something at hand (corrugated cardboard, a piece of furniture, a rain jacket...), and effectively disappears from view. The loud and distinct noises of her entrance and occupation (the jingling of keys, the rattling of paper, the scraping of metal chair legs across a floor...) abate, the camera sustains its fixed view of the scene, and silence and stillness return, as if the performer were not there at all. As if she had never been.

The cycle of silence, noise, silence on the soundtrack perfectly echoes the visuals. It also adds to the unsettling correspondence between time and space in which, despite all the material objects in sight, human beings play a fugitive role. Although gender is not Beer's primary consideration, it's difficult to subtract this subject from a repeated scenario in which a woman enters a place of work or learning and makes herself invisible. A completely different mood would prevail if the performer were a man.

The other elements here—the still photo of an outrageously cluttered office and a sculptural grouping composed of resonantly banal materials—speak to the videos and further complicate them. The clutter in the photo suggests another element of our human relationship to the material world, one that's not so much physical as metaphysical. We may use objects to claim a home or an office, but at a certain point, the objects have their revenge. They claim us.  
Source URL: <http://www.straight.com/article/ruth-beer-scenes-unseen>