

GRACE MCQUILTEN

Sue de Beer, *Black Sun*: The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York March 3 - June 17, 2005

*I want the power to make people love me.*¹

A void waits in a high-rise building in midtown Manhattan, New York. Walk out from the mass of colliding bodies on the street, through revolving doors, past a security guard and discover a dolls house the size of the gallery. Inside, leather beanbags beckon the viewer to recline in front of a split screen. Within this house, inside this building, we enter Sue de Beer's two-channel video, *Black Sun*, where we are lured by young, beautiful protagonists into a world of unfulfilled desire.

Black Sun contributes to an explosion of recent artwork that explores contemporary subjectivity through the lens of teenage experience. Here, in de Beer's empty suburban house, adolescence is presented as a site of imagining, of danger and excitement, and as the locus of sexual desire. The video is presented simultaneously across two screens, and its fragmented narrative unfolds in a landscape composed of fantastical imagery that is moodily lit with artificial light. The characters, two teenage women, exist in the realms of dream and memory, caught between childhood fantasy and the risks of awakening sexuality. A fluffy toy unicorn dances with one woman, dressed as a pink ballerina, to *You Can't Hurry Love*. Meanwhile, adorned in a ghost-costume, another woman skulls alcohol and kisses a masked man, before slowly stripping for the camera. Objects suggestive of lost childhood are juxtaposed with sexuality in a moonlit suburban environment. De Beer employs a noir sensibility – knives collide beautifully with shadows – which is rendered slightly absurd by the presence of children's toys and the young women themselves. This adds to the theatricality of the environment, which provides a stage for the characters to enact their sexual yearning.

Playing with surface images, *Black Sun* revels in emptiness. It presents a sleek, cool world that is somehow just out of reach. The disjointed structure of the narrative suggests memory; the women's experiences are caught in moments, and this is reinforced by the juxtaposition of an older woman's face and a constant changing of scene. No dialogue accompanies the characters' movements. Instead, their thoughts are reiterated through the text of Dennis Cooper's novels *Closer* and *Period*. When they speak, the women repeat dialogue that coldly expresses a desire for the power of attraction, or that attempts to shroud them in mystery. Self-consciously posing for the camera, both women rehearse their desires – participating in a voyeuristic encounter

¹ Extract from Dennis Cooper's novel *Closer*, used in monologue in *Black Sun*. See Dennis Cooper, *Closer*, New York: Grove Press, 1989.

with the viewer that masks their own narcissistic gaze. A dark mood hangs on their movements, creating an overriding sense of emptiness and melancholy. Moving through a staged world, repeating someone else's words, the identities of *Black Sun's* protagonists are hollowed out, empty, like the architectural space that frames them. Forever unfulfilled, their desires can only be retrieved through the repetition of signs from popular culture.

While evocative and moving in one sense, *Black Sun* feeds the contemporary cult of youth. De Beer is shortsighted in overlooking the way popular culture capitalises on unfulfilled desires – turning them toward the consumption of sleek, beautiful objects. Objects whose seductive surfaces mask the emptiness they engender. The title of the work, tellingly, is drawn from Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression*, a psychoanalytic text that describes depression and melancholia as stemming from childhood loss – specifically, the loss of the first object of love, the mother.² Following traditional Lacanian and Freudian analysis, Kristeva models feminine sexuality in terms of lack, casting desire as unfulfilled longing. In this model, women are trapped in a specifically feminine sexuality, ever wanting their lost love object, ever *wanting*.

Black Sun's young women, fetishising their bodies while desiring desirability, do not challenge this construction of feminine sexuality. Rather, de Beer aestheticises its melancholic consequences. Like the absent voices of its characters, desire is a “black sun” of longing where ultimately no-one is fulfilled. Our only hope, de Beer seems to suggest, lies vicariously in the beauty of this melancholic other-world – a place out of reach, found in popular fantasy, and attainable only by reiterating the fetishes of consumer culture.

Black Sun, a void in the heart of Manhattan, promises to evoke the depths of unconscious desire. Instead, it lures its viewers into the hollow space of contemporary consumer culture. The women contained within its empty spaces desire their own entanglement, while the camera seduces the viewer to desire their melancholic world. *Black Sun* might promise a recuperation of lost subjectivity through its split lens, but only in the very terms that reinforce loss and lack as the basis of identity formation. There is no offer of release from this cycle, only the cold comfort of hollow props and stylized images.

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² See Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.