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'Total Art': A new vision of videos at National Museum of Women in the Arts

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By Rebecca Ritzel

Kathryn Wat was never a huge fan of video art exhibits, until she was asked to curate one.

As chief curator of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Wat has seen many video art installations in her travels, and her chief complaint is that the clips are often mind-numbingly long. Her second is that after each reel finally ends, viewers stumble along in the dark until they reach the next glowing screen.

"I really don't like it when a video exhibit feels like it's just a series of darkened rooms," Wat said. And as to the long, drawn-out clip problem, she added, "I have curated this exhibit to suit my own attention span."



"La Petite Mort", Alex Prager

The result is the landmark exhibit "Total Art: Contemporary Video," which opened earlier this month at the museum in Northwest Washington. It is the museum's first all-video exhibit, and an occasion that marks the unveiling of several new acquisitions.

Going all-video also allows for a thematic shift. Some paintings and sculptures in the museum's collection date back to the 1500s, but for 400 years, the story behind most artwork by women is one of overcoming obstacles. Women would struggle to get an education, and then to find clients. That is not the case with video.

"Women have been involved with mechanically produced images from the very beginning — from the 1960s in the case of video art," Wat said. "I was really excited to tell a slightly different narrative, and to focus not on women overcoming, but on women's artistic vision, and all the awesome things that they've been doing."

With 10 carefully chosen installations, Wat has been able to represent artists from eight countries and feature works created over a span of 34 years. Best of all, "You can get in and out of here in about an hour and you'll have seen everything," Wat said.

The entrance to the exhibit is marked by a rotating neon searchlight that splashes "Total Art!" on the gallery walls. The cheeky greeting implies, correctly, that not every work will be a contemplative downer. Patrons who start chronologically begin in a room featuring Dara Birnbaum's "Technology/Transformation" (1978/1979), which is essentially a series of looped clips from the TV show "Wonder Woman." Watching Lynda Carter whirl around on repeat and trade a prim suit for spandex and golden manacles serves as a reminder that what was supposedly empowering about Wonder Woman was actually pretty silly.

"Many of the first videos were feminist in focus," Wat said. "The Birnbaum certainly is. Enough time has passed so now it's just full-on retro. It's just awesome. It's fun, and funny, and everyone is just in on the joke."

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The next oldest work in the exhibit is from 1996, and it's a trippy, space-age video of a Japanese model (who is also the artist, Mariko Mori) singing in an airport and dressed like she is en route to the fan convention Comic-Con. Starring in their own works has long been a calling card for video artists. In addition to Mori's selfie-as-a-cyborg, "Total Art" features a panned-camera, body-length shot of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist called "Blauer Leibesbreif" ("Blue Bodily Letter"). The artist lies naked on a forest floor, with rhinestones embedded in her mouth and pubic hair. More modest, but also more politically charged, are the self-portrait videos of Kenyan-German artist Ingrid Mwangi, who arranges her dreads over her face and grunts like an animal in her discomfiting installation called "Neger Don't Call Me."

Most of the remaining artists in "Total Art" were more interested in setting scenes rather than starring in them, and none created a more elaborate tableau than English artist Eve Sussman. To film "89 Seconds at Alcázar," she hired 11 actors (and a dog) to recreate Diego Velázquez's circa 1656 masterpiece "Las Meninas." The 10-minute video culminates with the costumed actors assuming the positions in the painting, with a young actress playing the Infanta Margarita at the center. And if the dwarf off to the right looks familiar ...

"That's Peter Dinklage. From 'Elf,'" Wat said. Dinklage also stars in the TV series "Game of Thrones" on HBO.

The figures in Israeli artist Michal Rovner's "Data Zone, Cultures Table #3" are all anonymous. As viewed through five petri dishes positioned on top of computer monitors beneath a table, miniscule men dash back and forth, forming masses, patterns and a Star of David. Rovner started the project by filming a group of people, then edited the footage to create digital flashmobs. In Wat's estimation, Rovner's work required more manipulation than any other installation in "Total Art."

"Video art technology is improving, which enables artists to express things that are more seamless," Rovner said in an e-mail sent from Israel. "It's easier now to stretch the image in ways you couldn't before."

Rovner also works extensively with lighting. She said she doesn't identify as a video artist, but as an artist who works in multiple mediums. The same is true for Alex Prager, a 30-something California artist who may be better known as a photographer. If you missed her "Face in the Crowd" exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art last year, "Total Art" includes a Prager film that Wat thinks represents the future of film-as-art.

"La Petite Mort" is a six-minute high-def odyssey depicting an Anna Karenina-esque tragedy. The French actress Judith Godrèche stars as a 1960s mod wearing heavy mascara and pink lipstick that clashes with her coral blouse. She dives into a pond, then emerges with a perfectly dry bouffant. A crowd that looks straight out of Norman Rockwell painting stares at her, frowning.

"You can tell that there's something just a little bit off about everything," Wat says, and her curatorial fellow, Rachel Gustafson, jumps in to coin the term "Awkward Americana." As the film ends, the camera spirals up into the sky, and a familiar voice chimes in with some lines about death and transcendent love and meeting God. That's the English actor Gary Oldman, who is well known for playing villains.

"We have famous people in our exhibit," jokes Gustafson, "There's Lynda Carter and Peter Dinklage and Gary Oldman."

"Total Art: Contemporary Video" showcases women artists. Through Oct. 12. National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1250 New York Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 202-783-5000