

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Mary Lucier at Lennon, Weinberg

Mary Lucier's new video installation *The Plains of Sweet Regret* is a poignant visual tone-poem on the emptying out of America's northernmost prairies. It surrounds the viewer with five projections fed by separate video channels, animating the walls of the narrow, darkened gallery and, initially, creating a powerful impression of being transported westward past wintry flatlands, ghost buildings and once-grand barns. Focus eventually shifts to portions of the North Dakota countryside that, while forlorn, still retain life: a steepled church, a casino. We also view one of the culprits of depopulation—the agribusiness factories belching out smoke.

Lucier, who helped define video art in the 1970s, is one of its most multidimensional practitioners. Often she composes total environments, tinged with romanticism, that account for the viewer's presence in space. Sometimes she incorporates found objects, using them sculpturally. In this case, a smattering of old-fashioned school desks provided seating that could be moved around; it was impossible to view all three walls at once. (This version was scaled down from an initial installation at the North Dakota Museum of Art in 2004, which included several plasma screens.) An English major turned sculptor, Lucier crafts works that often have a literary flavor. Frequently, she deals with themes of loss, in an epic yet intimate way. *Floodsongs* (1998) also concerned the Dakotas, specifically the 1997 Red River deluge, in a project that involved the testimony of victims. *The Plains of Sweet Regret* is wordless, just as, in the northern plains, human presence is rare.

Perhaps for that reason, the 18-minute odyssey had, despite its melancholy, a rather cool emotional temperature; it seemed at times not to fully coalesce. Occasionally, meanings were opaque, as in close-ups of locals moving their heads in slow motion (an essay in the North Dakota exhibition's catalogue reveals them to be actors in a community theater), or the recurring image of a hand holding a grasshopper. (A plague of locusts? Good luck?)

Composer Earl Howard's plaintive soundtrack of synthesized sounds, however, creates a moving evocation of rustic prairies, bringing to mind guitar, jew's harp and church organ simultaneously. The camera lingers over iconic details: old blue jeans, almost calcified, in a pile of detritus; an overturned toy rocking chair covered with decades of dust; ancient bowling trophies, their silvery veneer chipped. And grander themes were hinted at—the vanishing frontier, an America in decline. In a redemptive conclusion, Lucier arrives at some of the still-functioning farms. In one cattle pen tended by a plump ranch hand, a cow calves, then licks away the white-blue sac of afterbirth: life continues, no matter what the circumstances.

A lengthy, one-channel coda continued the vanishing-West theme. Sequences of rodeo riders being thrown by their bulls are technically manipulated in such a way that images roughly divide in the middle to mirror one another, blossoming and contracting at the center. This sleight of hand, accompanied by a George Strait country-and-western tune, shifts the mood, and seems frustratingly formalist.

In the final sequence, a blond rodeo rider (again, mirrored) walks off, seemingly lost reflection. Perhaps the point is that there are two sides to every cowboy? It all weaves into the tapestry of lush images, leaving the viewer with some tantalizing, irresolvable enigmas. Lucier's true artistic soul mates come from before the advent of the new media she helped pioneer—they are the 19th-century landscape painters who had such genius at finding, within the countryside, the most profound of life's truths.

—Carey Lovelace

Partial view of Mary Lucier's *The Plains of Sweet Regret*, 2004-07, five-channel video installation, 18 minutes; at Lennon, Weinberg.

