

Frances Richard, "Reviews: Catherine Sullivan," *Artforum*, May 2008, pp. 376

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Catherine Sullivan

METRO PICTURES

One can't summarize Catherine Sullivan's video *Triangle of Need*, 2007, but particulars can be given: The work was produced during residencies at the Walker Art Center and at Vizcaya, an opulent estate built in 1916 on Florida's Bay of Biscayne by International Harvester magnate James Deering. Additional shooting was carried out in an abandoned apartment in Chicago (the city once home to the original factory of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company [International Harvester's parent company]). Sullivan collaborated, as she typically does, with an ensemble of actors and dancers, and with the composer Sean Griffin, plus choreographer Dylan Skybrook and film director Kunle Afolayan. Transferred from 16-mm film, the video was projected in three parts in three rooms. A three-channel segment in black and white, and a single channel in black and white and degraded color showed on a folding portable screen, while a four-channel portion in color was projected onto a screen suspended from the ceiling. Benches and red velvet drapes provided the gallery mise-en-scène. And content? It involves Neanderthal orphans coaxed to mate by a trio of headmistress women, Nigerian e-mail scams, time travel and psychic permeability, an invented language called Mousterian (after the Paleolithic culture that travels under that name in archeological circles), a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, and figure skating.

"There is absolutely going to be a great doubt and distrust in your heart," an actor explains earnestly, facing the camera. He is quoting an e-mail from one Dr. Patrick Obi, who promises to share the fortune of Harold Bowen, an engineer killed in Nigeria, if only you provide your bank details. It is, of course, the artist's address to the audience. Disarmingly, Sullivan sets herself up as a scam artist who spins a tale so bewildering that we buy it—but instead of giving us nothing for something she constructs a fun house of paleoanthropology, eugenics, silent film, robber-baron capitalism, and fantasies of communication with a monstrous yet familiar other. Marrying what she calls "vestigial narratives" of cultural supremacy to Skybrook's "disfigurement choreography," Sullivan stages a pageant of collapsing selfhood, where the only locus of identity is gesture—physical tics that under pressure turn hypertrophic and alien, until race, gender, nationality, historical origin, even species read just as a congeries of symptoms.

What this actually looks like is a mesmerizing, confusing series of ensemble set pieces, with players costumed in nineteenth-century-cum-commedia style. Sullivan and Afolayan—a Nigerian actor and director of popular dramas—shot from the same script and intercut their footage, which is sound-tracked by Griffin's mix of (among other

things) Moog synthesizer and reconstructed prehistoric flute. The brilliantly physical performers speak Mousterian, which Griffin concocted from incompatible and debunked theories of Neanderthal speech. It sounds like Ubbi-Dubbi crossed with avant-garde art song, full of gutturals, clicks, and ululations. Occasional English crystallizes, and there are subtitles, but it doesn't make sense anyway. (A character called

Eulalie—after Poe's poem—is encouraged by her family to remain asleep so that they can continue to exhibit her as a somnambulist. Someone called Next of Kin gets into everybody's minds. Mme. Decazeville, Mrs. Giethoorn, and Mme Niagara also play Bickering Neighbors, while a member of the Grecian Primitive Society and Half-Frozen Girl are double-cast, respectively, as Orphan Man and Orphan Lady, the Neanderthals. Et cetera.)

Vizcaya—itsself a Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical pastiche—clashes deliriously with the movement vocabulary developed by Skybrook, drawn from paleobiological speculation about Neanderthal locomotion, plus caveman films. Vizcaya doubles for down-at-heel Chicago and Neanderthals for industrialists and scientists (and artists), while Rohene Ward, the figure skater, spins on a separate screen in a different room, in elegant counterpoint to the grotesque and synergistic trance entrapping everyone else. He's the angel of history, or film-flicker incarnate. But he's singular, and mute. The others, in Mousterian madness, have—or are—each other.

—Frances Richard

Catherine Sullivan, *Triangle of Need*, 2007, multichannel color and black-and-white video and 16-mm film installation, dimensions variable, 56 minutes. Installation view.



