

WE COULD BE HEROES

For a recent residency in Banff, Louise Noguchi arrived with an interest in developing work around the theme of “heroic landscapes.” Not the traditional heroic landscapes of romantic history painting, mind you, but those grown from contemporary, popular culture: settings of fantasy and escape. An installation of pink Styrofoam sculptures (*Shanghai Dragon*) and a video of spectators on a gondola ride in Las Vegas (*Il Momento LV*) resulted from the residency. While their aesthetic strategies are highly dissimilar, these works both explore larger-than-life settings. Recalling the line “we could be heroes” from David Bowie’s popular song *Heroes* (1977), they pry at the part of us that hopes for transformative potential in ourselves, given just the right circumstances. For some reason, we expect the external world to provide those circumstances — whether through film, travel, or the people around us — and Noguchi plays with the relationship between expectation and setting.

A room full of pink Styrofoam is, admittedly, an unusual interpretation of a heroic landscape. The curious forms conjure anything from the clumsy robots of early science-fiction films to the utopian architecture of Buckminster Fuller or early Coop Himmelb(l)au. They exist somewhere between anthropomorphized architecture and sculpture. Given the title *Shanghai Dragon*, notions of the Orient — both the Chinese pagodas of the past and Shanghai’s monolithic skyscrapers of the present — also come to mind. A photographic series lines the walls, not unlike film stills from a movie. Are these flimsy towers the protagonists in this scene, or do they simply serve as a background for the viewer — a curious landscape in which we could enact some impending script?

Noguchi based her forms on Moisture Vaporators, the devices scattered throughout Luke Skywalker’s home planet Tatooine in *Star Wars*. Though these forms are recognizable to some, it takes either a photographic memory or a die-hard fan to recognize them precisely. Regardless, their aesthetic qualities suggest an unmistakable link to futuristic settings. Or, more precisely, the future as it was envisioned in the past — a mechanical future of clunky robots and multi-levered machines — an older, outdated form of technology. In the book *Taking Things Seriously*, a series of short essays about personal, significant objects, philosopher Mark Kingwell remarks about a chunky 1970s Baia Dual 8 Film Editor that “like all defunct technology, the reviewer carries an aura of nostalgia for the future... it sits on my desk, lamp lighted, arms outstretched, little handles dangling, expectant and begging to illuminate strips of film — stories and memories — that are never going to come.”¹ One could say much the same of Noguchi’s pink sculptures, which draw inspiration from these outmoded designs. Viewed with contemporary eyes, they contain a somewhat naïve optimism. And one we’ve perhaps come to miss.

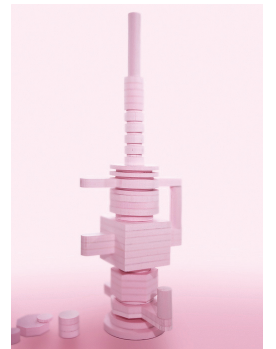
Standing before *Shanghai Dragon*, the viewer can easily imagine a *Star Wars* fanatic wanting to recreate the Tatooine landscape — someone with a grand vision for an exact replica, but with only a supply of pink Styrofoam at her disposal. The result is more than a little comical; it’s a film set of sorts, but with the quality of props one might expect in Ed Wood’s *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959). Noguchi goes even further, and delivers the TINKERTOY version, deliberately undermining the enterprise. Echoes of Kristan Horton’s photographic series *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* (2005) surface, where the artist likewise delved into cinema’s history, developing an obsession with the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove* after a supposed 700-plus viewings. Horton’s series of absurd photographic stills recreates each frame from the film in still-life format, using everyday household items: cassette tapes in place of mission control recorders, plastic milk crates instead of buildings. Horton remarks in an interview, “my perception was saturated by the film, and this caused me to respond to it. You can see this among *Star Wars* fans that log hundreds of viewings and go on to make Storm Trooper outfits for themselves in their living rooms. It’s a need to manifest the reality of the film in life.”² This need to push the film fantasy into real life is the basis of much frenzied collecting and fandom that seem particularly prevalent in the genre of film that Noguchi references (*Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, for instance, have a ravenous collecting fan base.) By recreating the setting of hero Luke Skywalker’s home planet, Noguchi not only selects a nostalgic, innocent moment in the film, but also injects her sculptural method with an element of absurdity that reflects a certain crazed obsession.



In *Shanghai Dragon*, we know the sculptures aren’t intended to look real. They refer to imagination’s role in the willing suspension of disbelief. Does it matter if a homemade Storm Trooper costume or a Moisture Vaporator sculpture is realistic, as long as the imagination is willing to carry it off? And that suspension, that imagination, that willingness to escape into other worlds, is something that everyone shares, regardless of age. Film is a perfect haven for these escapes, but outside the screen, real places exist for leaving yourself behind. From Disneyland to island resorts, much of the vacation industry is predicated on the notion of escape.

And then there’s Las Vegas. Aside from the illusion of instant wealth (and resulting life transformation) offered in the casinos, Vegas offers a plethora of simulated landscapes from the most coveted locations in the world. You can visit the Egyptian Pyramids, the ruins of Ancient Rome, the streets of Paris, or take a gondola ride through the canals of Venice. Noguchi filmed *Il Momento LV* at this last location.

Filmed against an operatic score, Noguchi documents the passage of visitors riding the gondolas. Watching a series of moving portraits, we have full exposure to their expressions as the gondolas move along the canal. Noguchi captures the riders on film at the high point of the ride, just as the gondolier breaks into song. From the comfortable position of spectator, we watch a meaningful unfolding of emotions, but not the kind we might expect. Rather, the expressions project a surprisingly intense combination of discomfort, hesitation and feigned delight. Just as the manufactured moment reaches its peak, the riders appear to share an intensely unsettling sensation, one that nearly borders on fear. Once the gondolier breaks into song, the surrounding audience flash their cameras at the scene, dazzling the gondola riders with lights. Their faces expose the awkward effort of trying to maintain an illusion, to conjure the expected emotions while being immersed in a spectacle. The familiar distance of the voyeur disappears as the audience members become the subjects of observation. The riders recognize their entrapment, this sudden role reversal, as they become performers in the spectacle. They are the heroes in this grand setting, the focus of all attention — but without warning, preparation, or script.



The video recalls Noguchi’s earlier studies of cowboy culture, in particular her photography series *Document* that depicts Wild West theme park performances in such locations as Six Gun City in Jefferson, New Hampshire and Donley’s Wild West Town in Union, Illinois. Speaking about *Document*, curator Marie-Josée Jean remarks that “What is fascinating about the performances that Noguchi documents is the way in which cowboy history is recreated so that it corresponds exactly to the audience’s expectations. Wild West theme parks can thus be seen as sites of symbolic action, in the way they stage the collective imagination.”³ Likewise, *Il Momento LV* documents the recreation of a collective desire, whereby participants come to experience the pinnacle of romance in Venice. But in the gondolas, they cross the threshold between audience member and participant, and are left wrestling with how to reconcile their expectations with their new realities.

One can’t help wondering if the real Venice can even provide the level of grand romance that Vegas portends to simulate. Perhaps it’s not so much a simulation of a place that Vegas attempts to capture as it is the simulation of a perfected vision carried in the mind. In his book *The Art of Travel* (2002), philosopher Alain de Botton notes that “The anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress, they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments, and thus, without either lying or embellishing, they lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting woolliness of the present.”⁴ Thus, the *anticipation* of living the grand moment may be the best state of mind to experience it. The Las Vegas version of Venice is the abridged version: stripped clean of sewage water smells, overwhelming crowds of foreigners, or the exhaustion of travel. Vegas attempts to simplify the experience by catering to our imagined versions of place. But perhaps the filmic, fantasized version created in our inner minds — whether we place ourselves in Venice, or in any other larger-than-life setting — is as close to reality as we can expect to get.

Shannon Anderson

Shannon is a freelance writer and curator. She has worked for Oakville Galleries as Exhibition Coordinator and Curator and is currently Associate Editor at *Azure* magazine in Toronto.

1. Mark Kingwell in *Taking Things Seriously: 75 Objects with Unexpected Significance*, Joshua Glenn and Carol Hayes, eds. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), n.p.

2. “*Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* by Kristan Horton. Interview by Nicole Pasulka.” *The Morning News* 14 May 2007. http://themorningnews.org/archives/galleries/dr_strangelove_dr_strangelove/

3. Marie-Josée Jean, “The System of Allusions” in *Image and Inscription: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Photography*, Robert Bean, ed. (Toronto: YYZBooks and Gallery 44, 2005), 48.

4. Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 15.

IN SCENE

Louise Noguchi

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List of Works

Mirror 1 2008
digital c-print on Dibond; 107 x 305 cm

Mirror 2 2008
digital c-print on Dibond; 122 x 191 cm

Mirror 3 2008
digital c-print on Dibond; 122 x 191 cm

Mirror 4 2008
digital c-print on Dibond; 122 x 82 cm

Mirror 5 2008
digital c-print on Dibond; 122 x 82 cm

Shanghai Dragon (Moisture Forms) 2008
styrofoam sculptures

Il Momento LV 2007
DVD

Louise Noguchi

Education

2000 University of Windsor, MFA, Multi-media
1981 Ontario College of Art, AOCA

Selected Recent Solo Exhibitions

2008 Centre A, Vancouver (upcoming)
In Scene, Thames Gallery, Chatham, Ontario
Shanghai Dragon, Birch & Libralato, Toronto

2004–05 *document*
Birch & Libralato, Toronto
WARC, Toronto
New Gallery, Calgary
Dazibao, Montreal

2002 Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (*In Light*, video series)
luygunrung, Robert Birch Gallery, Toronto

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

2007 *Manifest: Colonial Tendencies of the West*
Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

2006 *Make Believe*, Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton
The Cold City Years, The Power Plant, Toronto

2005 *Expo 2005*
VIP Lounge, Canadian Pavilion, Aichi Japan
Contemporary Photographic Art In Canada: The Space of Making
Neuer Berliner Kuntsverein, Germany
Städtisches Museum Zwickau, Germany
Kunstmuseum Heideinheim, Germany
Städtische Galerie Waldkraiburg, Germany
Robert Birch Gallery at Koch und Kessler Berlin, Germany

2004 *Canadian Identities*, McMichael Art Gallery, Kleinburg, Ontario

2003 *Courtisane* Short Film and Video Festival (installation), Ghent, Belgium

2002 *Das zweite Gesicht*, Deutsches Museum, Munich, Germany
Crack, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario
Media City Film and Video Festival, Artcote, Windsor, Ontario

Collections

Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario
Agnes Etherington, Kingston, Ontario
The American Bank, Chris Keese Collection, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
AstraZeneca, Canada
Private collections



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