

# Issue 127

## Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson: Consider the Belvedere by Erica Prince

Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson's *Consider The Belvedere* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia is an unsettling escape into an abundant dream world. Inanimate objects are imbued with power and personality, and familiar materials are manipulated to reveal deeper, more dangerous energies. *Consider The Belvedere* is the second of a three-part project that began with *Bottles Under the Influence*, which was presented at the Walter Phillips Gallery at The Banff Centre in 2013. This latest collaboration includes the first two 16mm films in an installation that doubles as a stage set for the production of the final film in the trilogy.



Feyrer and Henderson have created an overwhelming atmosphere – a dark, dense space with patches of brightly coloured light emanating from behind glass, like a nocturnal animal exhibit in a zoo. One begins to feel like a detective assessing the aftermath of a crime, piecing together the evidence found in ritual detritus and alchemical leftovers.

The show is divided into three sections, arranged in the gallery in no obvious consecutive order – *The Night Times Press Bar*, *The Beach*, and *The Hotel Room*.

At *The Night Times Press Bar*, viewers are invited to type up their dreams and watch them join the collective unconscious in a purple projection. Dreams disappear after a few seconds, perhaps invisibly archived in a collective dream cloud. *The Night Times* newspaper is a takeaway publication that neatly arranges Feyrer's and Henderson's dreams into universally relatable categories, such as movies, classifieds, bugs, et cetera. The artists' dream transcriptions are akin to the automatic writing and poetry of the Surrealists. The Surrealist poets considered this their research, attempting to find absolute truths hidden in the extensive metaphors of dreams. One can't help but assume that this is where it all begins for the collaborative duo – a dedication to this Surrealist research, this gathering of poetic source material that is accessible to all of us, just below the surface.

The bar itself is a large table with a base constructed to look like the facade of a shrunken building. It is inset with small windows, some open to reveal miniature interior vignettes, and some closed with blinds and curtains, making us guess at what's inside. The viewer is forced to peek in like a giant Peeping Tom, looking for action in an abandoned hotel.

Three large woven scrims stand nearby, nets of tangled detritus, like huge, messy dreamcatchers. Each is constructed with decidedly different materials – phone cords and Vitaminwater bottles, chicken wire and drop-ceiling chunks, fishing line and sea grasses. Perhaps each possesses specific dream filtering capabilities that will be revealed in the third film.

*At The Beach*, we are invited to sit on a large, wormlike pillow sewn from towels to watch *Consider The Belvedere* (2015) on a projection screen that floats above a beach of plastic pellets. The film was shot in the exhibition at The Banff Centre and on location in Vancouver at the Belvedere apartment building. Filmed with an unsteady camera and punctuated by evil laughter and a phone call to a detective, the film references the mystery genre. The main character is a tall, suspicious yellow bottle with an Al Capone hat and an unmistakable silhouette that glows through the mini blinds like a bat signal on a hotel room wall.

*The Hotel Room* is covered in plush, white carpet. Here, we encounter *Bottles Under The Influence* (2012), the first film in the trilogy. Here, glass bottles from the collection of the Historical Museum of Wine & Spirits in Stockholm reveal themselves to us through their gestures, in relation to one another and through the carefully arranged scenarios they find themselves in. They overflow and explode, soiling white snow with their colourful contents.

One wall of *The Hotel Room* is lined with black mini-fridges, each containing a gestural, thick glass vessel with such titles as *The Old Hag* and *The Pest Detective*. These bottles are more sculpturally distinct than the ones in *Bottles Under the Influence*, perhaps sculpted by the artists to embody specific characters and contain their essence. In any case, they glow with auras of coloured light and their contents are detailed in the exhibition labels, noting alchemical mixtures like valerian root and moonshine, or a chance mixture of the contents of all of the other bottles.

In the centre of *The Hotel Room* are two yin and yang beds inset with life-size, glowing glass figures. Painted abstractions



and a nightmarish bedside-table fountain complete the scene. This extremely foreboding scenario will inevitably play a part in the third film, and it is impossible not to imagine the cinematic potential. This is the first time in this body of work that we have seen a human figure. Perhaps the third film will address the sleeping bodies in relation to one another, which may be a version of the artists themselves.

The show demands something of the viewer: a time investment long enough to appreciate the abundance of subplots, and a willingness to surrender rational thought in an effort to become intoxicated by the shadowy, surreal atmosphere. Feyrer and Henderson are extremely generous with their clues, but the generosity leans towards the material. The subjects remain freely disjointed, filled with dream logic and regurgitated materials. We are left to speculate, knowing that a clear verdict is not the goal.

In the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), André Breton speaks at length about dreams, and finds it “incredible that this important part of psychic activity has still attracted so little attention.”<sup>1</sup> Consider *The Belvedere* reminds us that, in 2015, we still have a long way to go in reconciling our waking states and our dream states. The dreams have always been there, but we have been ignoring what seems indulgent, irrelevant and nonsensical. Feyrer and Henderson are reclaiming dreams as a compelling subject for art-making in a contemporary context. Leaving the dark gallery at the ICA and stepping out into the sharp light of day is like waking from a dream, that flash of lucidity where it seems plausible that the dream world is as substantial as this strange waking life.