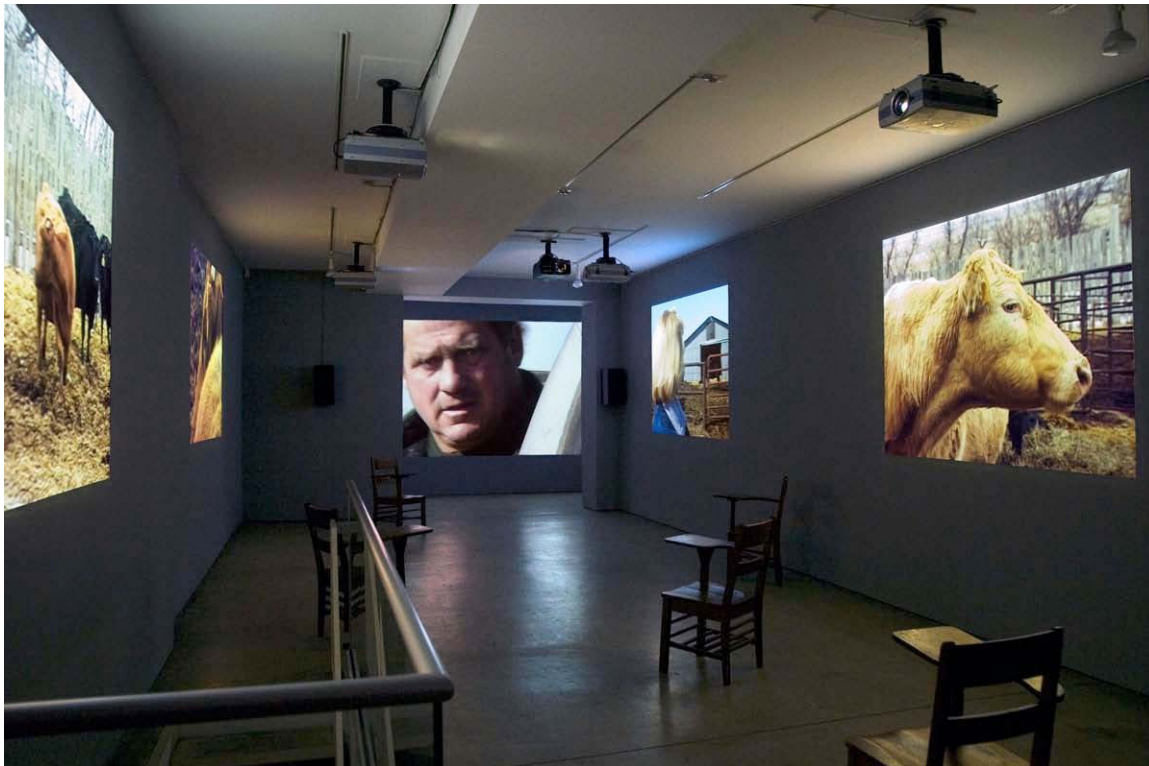


LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

514 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 Tel. 212 941 0012 Fax. 212 929 3265
info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

Mary Lucier, *The Plains of Sweet Regret*

Continues through April 28, 2007



Excerpts from selected reviews in print and online:

Mary Lucier began her career in video in the 1970s, when video was a proprietary medium of news transmission in America. Some artists found that it was a live and mercurial medium for solo performance, and could encompass the best aspects of photography and experimental film. Ms. Lucier has consistently used video to meld the documentary with the poetic.

Conceived as a five-channel synchronized video installation with surround-sound, the 18-minute *Plains of Sweet Regret* is a lyrical meditation upon the contemporary landscape and ghost towns of North Dakota. The artist's superb coordination of visual narrative, text, music and special effects fractures yet distills the subject matter into a new media ballad for the 21st century. Its evenhanded and unsentimental approach competes with an unmistakable elegiac mood brought on by the musical soundtrack. Ms. Lucier's sensitivity to color contributes to the work's powerful effect. Wooden school chairs anchor the viewer's experience of the ephemeral visuals with a concrete sense of the region's material culture.

Deborah Garwood, The New York Sun, March 29, 2007

“We are the center and the circumference,” said one of the North Dakotans in response to a questionnaire Lucier distributed to residents asking, “What do the plains mean to you?” The idea of being both center and circumference, Lucier says, belongs to the Zen tradition. It has accidental but potent prescience for the viewer who watches *The Plains of Sweet Regret* at Lennon, Weinberg on 25th Street; who finds that he, who moments ago considered himself to be standing in the economic and cultural center of the country and perhaps of the world, is filled with indescribably longing for a far off place; finds he is in fact standing at the circumference, gazing in not only at the source of his own grain, but at the source of his own most deeply felt myths. The lone farmer, the cowboy, the independent man, the freedom of the frontier.

Sofi Thanhauser, whitehotmagazine.com, April 2007

A loose 18-minute narrative addresses the depopulation of the Dakotas in a series of crisply evocative if familiar images. Sweeping footage of the plains and roads rolling off to the horizon proceed, shot by shot, into a montage of abandoned remnants of human settlement, peeling old advertisements, waterlogged and abandoned books, and a lost trophy. It’s a digital American Gothic, kin to films by Terrence Mallick and videos by artist Doug Aitkin. Lucier, who has been making video art since the early 70s, has been on the scene longer than either of them.

Loss and emptiness are only half of the story in Plains. “I wanted to depict something a little more hopeful,” Lucier says, “albeit ambiguously.” Midway into the work, she turns her gaze at a rodeo and changes the soundtrack to a crooning George Strait tune repeated in rolling waves of sound.

Abraham Orden, The Minute, artnet.com, April 5, 2007

In one sequence of the video, a bull is let loose from a holding pen. A cowboy tries to ride it, but is thrown off in a matter of seconds. He comes precariously close to being trampled and gored; at one point, he lands directly between the animal’s horns. A cadre of men, including a clown, circles their comrade and attempts a rescue. They manage to drive off the bull, whose rampaging hurdles and terrifying to behold. The scene runs at a pace slightly slower than life.

Once the bull calms down and lopes off, the scene begins again. But this time, a mirror image is superimposed upon the original. A Rorschach-like tumult ensues, bull and rider expanding and contracting into a heaving field of action. The scene is run yet again, complicated further by shifts in time. The temporal stagger creates a kaleidoscopic abstraction of transparent earthy tones and magical transitory pictures.

At the end, a wrangler brings a calf to the ground. For one fleeting instant, man and animal morph into each other as the divide between them dissolves. A rough-and-tumble collision of purpose is choreographed into a sinuous ballet. The rider lets go of the calf; both pick themselves up and walk away with breathtaking nonchalance. All the while, George Strait’s “I Can Still Make Cheyenne,” a plaintive country song about distance and loss, underscores the archetypal drama enacted by the rose. Ms. Lucier conjures up myth with a deceiving dispassion. It’s an awesomely beautiful sequence.

Mario Naves, The New York Observer, April 2, 2007

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info@lennonweinberg.com www.lennonweinberg.com

Mary Lucier

Lovelace, Carey. "Mary Lucier at Lennon, Weinberg." *Art in America*, November 2007.

Art in America

November 2007

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 in

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.