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 Yaddo, an upstate estate built in 1918 on Florida’s Bay of Biscayne by international Harvester magnate James Deering. Additional shooting was carried out in an abandoned apartment in Chicago, a 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 Steve Griffith, plus choreographers Dylan Skybrook and film director Katie Aokiyan. 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 segment 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 contemporary Neanderthal orphans coaxed to make war by a trio of headstrong women, Nigerian e-mail scams, time travel and psychic penetrability, an inverted language called Mournerian (after the Pomo-Lithe 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 douse of distress in your heart," an actor explains earnestly, facing the camera. He is quoting an email from one Dr. Patrick Obi, who promises to share the footage of Harold Brown, an engineer killed in Nigeria, if only you provide your bank details. It is, of course, the actor’s address to the audience. Drearily, Sullivan sets herself up as a war 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 postanthropology, episcopacy, silent films, rubber-baron capitalism, and fantasies of communication with a monstrous yet familiar other. Mirroring what the socalled "votegial narratives" of cultural supremacy to Skybrook’s "disgustment chorography," Sullivan stages a pageant of collapsing selfhood, where the only locus of identity is gesture—physical ticks that under pressure turn hypertrophic and alien, until race, gender, nationality, historical origin, even species read just as a congruence of symptoms.

What this really looks like is a mesmerizing, confusing series of ensemble set pieces, with players costumed in eighteenth-century comma-tie-dye style. Sullivan and Aokiyan—a Nigerian actor and director of popular dramas—shot from the same script and interact their footage, which is sound tracked by Griffith’s mix of (among other things) Moog synthesizer and reconstructed prehistoric flute. The brilliantly physical performers speak Mournerian, which Griffith concocted from incompatible and debunked theories of Neanderthal speech. It sounds like Uhhs-Dubbs crossed with avant-garde art song, full of gutturals, clicks, and babblings. Occasional English crystallizes, and there are subtitles, but it doesn’t make sense anyway. (A character called Edale—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. decaisne, Mrs. Gethersum, and Mme. Naigara also play Bedouin Neighbors, while a member of the Goulan Primitive Society and Half-Franz-Girl are double-cast, respectively, as Orphan Man and Orphan Lady, the Neanderthals’ Eternally.)

Vivace—she, a Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical pastiche—clashes definitively with the movement vocabulary developed by Skybrook, drawn from paleontological speculation about Neanderthal locomotion, plus caviar films. Yutucya 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 sympathetic trance entrapping everyone else. He’s the angel of hockey or film-flicker incarnate. But he’s singular and mute. The others, in Mournerian madness, have—or are—each other.

—Frances Richard