



Holly Zausner: Rise and Fall

Practically invisible but absolutely essential to the opening shot of Holly Zausner's film *The Beginning . . .* (2003) is a tiny, distant figure moving about on the vast flat roof of Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie. The camera, positioned on a higher building across the street from Mies van der Rohe's 1960s late masterwork, also takes in an array of buildings and trees, and some sparse traffic passing in front of the museum. Only the greatly reduced speed of the vehicles tells the viewer that this scene has been shot in slow motion, as was the entire film.

One can't determine what the person on the Neue Nationalgalerie roof is doing until the next shot, a much closer view that reveals a brown-haired woman repeatedly throwing a floppy yellow thing some 20 feet into the air and catching it as it comes tumbling back down. The camera follows the yellow object on its slowed ascent and fall. Occupying most of the frame behind this strange game is a panorama of the Berlin cityscape and an expanse of hazy sky. Another cut and we see an even closer shot of the woman, dressed as before in black sweater and black skirt, now gracefully hurling a large rubbery pink object onto the gravel-topped roof that she is standing on. The camera lingers a moment on the piece after it lands, allowing us to see that it is a stylized human figure whose attenuated arms and legs are connected to form two large loops on either side of the body. Disconcertingly, the bubble-gum colored figure quivers for a second after it hits the gray roof. The woman reaches to pick it up, then the film cuts away again to show her still in the act of reaching down, but this time to pick up a canary-yellow figure on a different rooftop in front of an ornately domed church (the historic Französische Dom, which today houses Berlin's Huguenot Museum) and, farther away, a giant construction crane. It was only after repeated viewings of the film in its DVD version that I noticed how the yellow figure echoes the gilded statue atop the Französische Dom. This doubling is hardly accidental, for everything in this beautifully composed and paced film, from the particular buildings visible in each scene to the prevailing meteorological conditions, is the result of careful planning and exhaustive retakes.

For the rest of this roughly 8-minute film, we see Zausner on a variety of Berlin rooftops, performing duets with her colorful rubber sculptures, which is in fact what these strange floppy things are. The sites were selected not only for their visual properties but also for their historical associations. In addition to performing on Mies's modernist monument, which is located close to where the Berlin Wall stood, Zausner also appears on the roof of the Max Tauthaus, originally a department store designed by the famous modernist Max Taut and now a residential and commercial building whose tenants include filmmaker Wim Wenders; the roof of the Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD), a foundation that sponsors artists and

Buvoli & Zausner

continued from page 155

writers to live and work in Berlin; and a rooftop from which one can see the famous Pergamon Museum. Two of the most striking shots, both toward the end of the film, show Zausner on the roof of the Altes Museum and the Zeughaus, surrounded by large Neo-Classical statuary. The Altes Museum (1822-30) was designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose work influenced Mies. The Zeughaus, originally an arsenal, served as a military museum under both the Prussians and the Nazis, and became a museum of German history for the Communists and, since 1990, for the reunited Germany as well. The final scenes were shot on the roof of the building that houses the offices of the *Berliner Zeitung*, a wide-circulation daily newspaper. Here, it was not the building itself that mattered so much as the view it offered of the Mitte, a neighborhood that was once Berlin's Jewish quarter and that has become, in recent years, the center of the city's thriving art scene.

As well as summoning up the history of Berlin, Zausner, an American who divides her time between Berlin and New York, evokes a range of emotions in the film. Sometimes she emphasizes the physical effort involved in hefting the larger sculptures. With their over 30 pounds of elongated deadweight, they are both literal and symbolic burdens, seeming in some shots like colorful cadavers that the artist engages in a kind of *danse macabre*. Other scenes are of a more exuberant nature, suggestive of a child joyfully tossing a ball or piece of clothing into the air. Because they are made of rubber, a substance nearly impossible to break no matter how ill used, these pliable figures also seem to signify human resiliency.

In one striking scene atop the Neue Nationalgalerie, Zausner conveys a sense of tenderness and compassion as she lifts up a large violet sculpture (the genitals signal that it's a male figure), cradles it in her arms and then slowly lets it go. The effect is of a cinematic, secular Pietà. While each shot in the film is composed with attention to color, light and shadow, this one is especially effective, with the whites and grays of the smooth stones on the large-gravel roof, the glistening violet rubber and the mottled yellow wall of a large modernist building (the Scharoun Bibliothek) in the background. It's a composition worthy of Godard or Antonioni. At the end of this shot, which looks like it was filmed in early morning or late afternoon, Zausner's body casts a distinctly Giacomettian shadow.

The chromatic richness—of both sculptures and settings—has a lot to do with the fact that the film is made in 35mm, an expensive, technically complex medium that not many artists take on. Zausner, who originally thought of doing the work in video, turned to 35mm when she realized that it was the only way to achieve the kind of slow-motion effects she wanted. The production probably wouldn't have been possible without the support Zausner found in Berlin's film community. She also benefitted from the remarkable openness of German institutions such as the Neue Nationalgalerie.

If a central subject of the film is Berlin and its architecture, just as important is the history of sculpture. It's obviously not by chance that Zausner chose to have herself filmed amid the Neo-Classical statues of the Altes Museum and the Zeughaus, or with the gilded statue on the dome of the Französische church in the background. These settings contextualize her rubber figures, underlining their affinity when airborne with the athletic grace of Classical sculpture. The effectiveness of the film owes much to the power of Zausner's figures, which subsume and reinterpret so much sculptural history, including prehistoric fertility figurines, the Baroque in all its sinuous eroticism, German Expressionism's distorted sufferers, Giacometti's stretched-out bodies, the shape-shifting industrial esthetic of Post-Minimalism (Serra's



Film still from Zausner's *The Beginning* . . .
Photo Jakobine Motz.

splashed lead, Benglis's poured latex, Hesse's extended filaments), and the polychrome vitality of Yves Klein and George Sugarman.

In the final six shots of the film, we see only the sculptures in flight against a blue sky, tumbling, twisting, practically floating. Given the setting of this film, it is hard not to think of the high-dive sequences in *Olympiad*, Leni Riefenstahl's documentary of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. After this dramatic, graceful realization of that old sculptural ambition to draw in space, the film closes with a printed out quote from French filmmaker Claire Denis: "Remorse is the beginning of freedom." This rather Sartrean-sounding phrase is uttered by the protagonist of Denis's *Beau Travail* (1999), a film set on a French Foreign Legion base in Africa. In the context of Zausner's film, the observation highlights the moodiness pervading these slow-motion scenes of bodies taking brief flight. The phrase might additionally be read as an oblique comment on the course of postwar German history.

The last sequence of flying sculptures is not only the conclusion of the film but also a signal moment in Zausner's artistic evolution over the last 10 years. Until the mid-1990s, Zausner was a relatively conventional sculptor, using plaster, Hydrocal, burlap and clay to make totemic, colored figures that she exhibited singly or in groupings. Around 1996, she began to wrap her sculptures, some now made from silicon rubber, around pieces of furniture such as Eames chairs and hotel beds. The next step in her development involved tossing her silicon rubber figures into the air on the rooftop of her Chelsea studio and having a photographer take pictures of the tumbling pieces in mid-flight. (She has also created performances in museums and galleries that involve her throwing numbers of her rubber sculptures onto large pedestals.) The engagement with photography ultimately led her to film. Despite her exploration of different mediums, Zausner has kept the focus on her sculptures. In the photographs and the film, her sensual, long-limbed figures are always protagonists, never props, even though they are now made with the specifics of cinema in mind. Although for *The Beginning* . . . she served as director, choreographer and performer, and is continuing to experiment with film, video and photography, Zausner remains primarily a sculptor, an artist deeply involved with the rich history, physical challenge and corporeal presence of three-dimensional form. □

Recent exhibitions of Luca Buvoli's work have been seen at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, N.C., the Glassell School of Art, Houston, and the Austin Museum of Art; his film *Adapting One's Senses to High Altitude Flying* (For Intermediates)—an Almost Silent Version will premiere at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on Nov. 22. *Howly Zausner's film The Beginning* . . . will be shown at the fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, as part of the Loop video festival [Nov. 18-24] and at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, in Spring 2005.