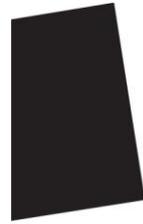


Sarah Beddington

Essay by Jessica Lack

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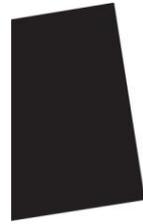
“Don’t look now,” John said to his wife, “but there are a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me”.

The opening sentence of Daphne du Maurier’s psychic thriller *Don’t Look Now* sees the protagonists John and Laura sitting at a café in Torcello playing their favourite game - speculating on the other diners. Their attention rests on two spinsters. Are they male twins in drag? Jewel thieves? Murderers? Or, as Laura finally concludes, “a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who’ve saved up all their lives to visit Venice.”

The stories John and Laura compose reflect the couple’s prejudices but they also capture a particularly human trait; that compulsive fascination for other people’s lives. Sarah Beddington’s short film *Brief Encounter* offers the viewer a similar situation. Seated in a cheap café framed by a plastic chair and serviceable tablecloths, and slightly masked by plastic sheeting, are a couple deep in conversation. Occasionally the man looks round. Does he sense they are being watched? The camera, still and silent, is a brooding presence enabling the most intimate access to the couple’s private world.

Beddington appears to offer the audience some very obvious clues to the couple’s relationship. The title is a dead give-away being the same as the 1945 British film starring Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. *Brief Encounter* was box-office dynamite, a simmering suburban love story about a bored housewife and a general practitioner written by the dramatist Noel Coward, and its association in this context immediately suggests that the meeting witnessed on screen is illicit. The woman is wearing a headscarf, leading the viewer to make cultural assumptions about the couple’s backgrounds. But things are never as simple as they seem and Beddington does not give away her secrets so easily. The film is a triptych, framed on one side by footage of the battered Beirut skyline over which a tethered hot air balloon slowly rises and on the other, a stony landscape with a small cedar tree - the motif of Lebanon. Creeping across this scrubby countryside is an insipid mist that, like the plastic sheeting in the restaurant, only partially conceals the view.

The scene is set up for scrutiny and the crucial elements of a daring love story are apparently on offer. But nothing happens. The grubby balloon bobs over the Holiday Inn – a building still pockmarked by shrapnel – and the mist continues to amble across the landscape. The audience are left only with their conjectures and become like John and Laura in their Torcello café, tourists speculating on the lives of others.



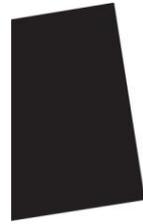
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Distance is vitally important to Beddington's art. From her early paintings, made after she graduated from St Martins to her latest video installation of Shanghai, the artist sees herself as an unseen witness, immersing herself in the world she wants to film and then withdrawing from it when she switches the camera on. She sometimes feels she dissolves into the landscape as she waits for something to happen, and it is this anticipation that the audience experience when watching her films.

Her paintings depict fairly anonymous places: a hotel lobby, a shop front, an office pot plant, and are always partially concealed by thin streaks of paint. The results capture a malaise associated with modern living; the dominance of sheen over substance. Even in her painting *Blue Jesus* (2003), the Catholic representation of Christ is slightly obscured by being flooded in an institutional blue neon light. It is this stilted, silent world that she captures, peered at through the scored lines of paint, that suggests associations with Edward Hopper, the painter who encapsulated the cheerless grime of small-town America. From late night diners to dilapidated railroad houses, Hopper's atmospheric paintings exude the suspense of a noir thriller.

Like Hopper, Beddington's paintings and films elicit something of the loneliness and isolation of the individual. In *Invisible Woman* (2004), Beddington films a shop window that reflects an image of a woman eating in a diner. The impression only appears when a car passes, darkening the window sufficiently to capture her. There is a Hitchcockian quality to the scene, and, like James Stuart's deft turns as an amateur detective in *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*, the audience are left loitering outside hoping to catch another glimpse. But she remains a lonely, anonymous figure, protected by the barriers Beddington erects to keep the viewer and the subject detached. The audience are also presented with the question of who the title is referring to, the subject quietly eating in the restaurant or the unseen artist shooting the footage from a neighbouring table. *Invisible Woman* combines the chill of the unseen predator with a very typical American paranoia, so acutely portrayed in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, together with the glacial gaze of the surveillance camera.

These descriptions have ignored one vital aspect of Beddington's films, and that is their poignant beauty. Each vignette is a haiku of human emotion. The new commission for Bloomberg SPACE *Places of Laughter and of Crying* has a similar appeal. It is a thirty-screen installation featuring footage taken by the artist over the past four years. Some run for an hour, others are no more than forty seconds long, but each screen captures something of Beddington's transitory existence. Ranging from the sublime – sunsets in Italy and Morocco – to the everyday – two chairs in her living room in Brooklyn or an oak tree in the rain – to the bleakly funny – a shopfront with the words "Happy Events" emblazoned on it, surrounded by the ruins of bomb-shattered buildings. This work also reveals the artist's non-linear approach to time. Each of these 'incidents' are given similar weight, creating a kind of entropy that harks back to the New York minimalists of the 1960s and the subtle works of Hiroshi Sugimoto.



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It is perhaps thanks to her recent experiences in China that this approach to time has evolved. She shot the film *Shanghai Moon* (2007) during the full moon festival feeling at times overwhelmed by the crowds who had come to the city to celebrate. The first scene, filmed from her hotel roof, captures waves of bodies shimmering in the morning light along the banks of the Huangpu. Beddington then directs her camera out to the vast expanse of the river where hundreds of barges are lumbering towards Shanghai. It is a direct and chilling indication of our global future, an army of slow, purposeful machines carrying building materials that will transform China. Once again, there is a shot of a tethered hot air balloon bobbing over the city, yet unlike the aimless one over Beirut – an image of frustrated aspiration – this multicoloured orb strains, rocking from side to side in its bid for freedom.

Like *Places of Laughter and of Crying*, *Shanghai Moon* offers the viewer brief, poetic moments of the city. Male office workers asleep against the glass of an enclosed ATM, the glittering disco ball in a nightclub, echoing the image of the full moon glimpsed faintly through the industrial grime of the city sky and most movingly of all, the futile attempts of a turtle to escape the captivity of a glass tank in a restaurant. Somehow these 'incidents' become a seductive narrative, one that guides us through the social and political aspects of this relatively unknown country. The sound of Beethoven's *Für Elise* played on a piano to an empty dance floor or the multicoloured umbrellas of commuters trudging through the rain are part of a series of simple moments of observation through which Beddington reveals the dilemma of the tourist, the perpetual outsider who is never invited to the party. An occasional voyeur, who skates across the vagaries of human existence with a digital camera always seeing yet never experiencing the drama in the twilight world of the jet-lagged and rootless voyager, lost in time and space.

Jessica Lack