



SALON 94
FREEMAN'S

THE HUGO BOSS PRIZE 2006
Guggenheim Museum

Hey...Um...Uh Oh...: The Video Works of Aida Ruilova
By Joan Young
Hugo Boss Prize 2006 catalogue

A woman crawls up a rickety stairwell, shaking the wooden banister in desperation; her distressed cries and the rapping of her blue fingernails against the handrail compose the unnerving soundtrack of what could possibly be an excerpt from a low-budget horror film. The oblique camera angles and quick-cut montage of the visual and audio elements produce a jarring experience for the viewer, who is drawn into the endless loop of the thirty-second video work, *Hey* (1999–2000), and who must wonder whether the woman is trying to escape some evil nemesis or is trapped in limbo within the dark recesses of her own mind. While we never learn from what real or mental demon the woman is fleeing, we are left with those feelings of excitement, anxiety, paranoia, and sometimes uneasy amusement common to the watcher of horror films, a favorite genre of the artwork's maker, Aida Ruilova.

Ruilova's video works stem from her studies in filmmaking, and in each series of works, she explores psychological states and the cinematic devices that create them on screen and in the viewer. In a pair of untitled works from 2002 and 2003, fundamental visual and audio mechanisms of filmmaking (the Titan/Nova dolly crane and the Nagra open-reel audio recorder) take on starring roles. The tools of production are now the protagonists. In each video a woman lies with the machine—reclining in the “palm” of the crane along with the camera as it swings back and forth across the shoreline, and along the edge of a cliff overlooking a misty cove, with the audio-recorder resting against her. [1] Through editing, Ruilova manipulates the single shot that comprises each work forward and reverse at differing speeds. Both videos are accompanied by the sound of uneven breathing—each inhalation and exhalation seems to draw the tide (and the crane) in and out as the tape is played forward and reverse. Like creatures from some science-fiction film, the machines appear to come to life, highlighting the sensory nature of the equipment that sees and hears all that the viewer does but with very different mechanisms.

In several works, Ruilova isolates and employs standard cinematic tools as the dominant structuring device. She draws heavily on theories of montage from 1920s Soviet cinema by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein: They argued that the montage technique mirrored everyday thought processes, in which a person pieced together disparate thoughts. Ruilova adopts the current popular application of the technique by contemporary music videos and television commercials, where a montage of quick cuts and oblique angles is commonly used in to disorient the viewer, to likewise bewilder her audience and render the psychology of a situation fraught. Differing, though, from the commercial formats is the brief duration of her works, which last less than thirty seconds and are composed of fast-cut edits. With the lack of traditional narrative structure, the experience of watching a Ruilova video replicates that of viewing a still image or painting; while the eye must travel over the canvas in order to grasp the relationships amongst all of the elements, in Ruilova's works, the eye must move about the screen as images quickly change to perceive all that is captured on video.

The videos portray agitated or deranged characters who inhabit claustrophobic interiors and forsaken outdoor spaces. Ruilova is interested in the humorous aspect of horror, the stereotypical characters, settings, props, and sounds that have evolved into kitsch yet still provoke a uneasiness in the viewer. In *Come here* (2002), a dilapidated house with peeling paint is filled with plants and a manic male who roams through a room as if a zombie or vampire, humming, hissing, and mouthing “come here.” The woman in *I have to stop* (2002) appears to be trapped in a dungeon, perhaps for her own protection, as she whispers the title while hanging from the bars that form the ceiling of the dark space or tapping on them with the rings on her fingers. Like characters in a B-movie horror film, these monster-protagonists appear to be imprisoned in an asylum. The combination of tight shots, oblique angles, and fast-cut editing heightens the anxiety of the situation—while the source of the uneasiness is not made explicit, Ruilova elicits a visceral response from the audience, which draws on its own experiences, fears, and memories to flesh out the narrative.



A classically trained pianist and founding member of avant-garde noise group Alva, Ruilova has remarked on the astonishing amount of information that can be communicated in a song and has striven to compress that amount of material into a visual work. [2] With their hypnotic aural and visual rhythm, her works are notable for their percussive syncopation and repetitious structure. For the soundtrack, Ruilova often selects a catchphrase, something that might linger long after viewing the work, like a memorable song lyric or phrase. [3] Similarly, the haunting imagery remains in the viewers' minds as they attempt to make sense of the essentially non-narrative video. In *Oh no* (2000), an anxious woman alternates the title's mantra with nervous laughter as she walks barefoot along the strings of electric guitars, creating the accompanying musical score. *You're pretty* (1999) features a man in a basement cellar embracing an amplifier, to which he lustfully chants the work's title when not scraping vinyl records across the cement floor and stone walls. The characters' seeming lack of control imbues the works with an air of insanity as well as an added sexual charge.

The titles again describe the phrases that compose the soundtrack for the recent series, consisting of *Lets Go*, *Uh Oh*, *Um* (all 2004), *OK*, and *Alright* (both 2005). In each, a lone figure delivers the title in a robotic fashion as the camera moves around him or her with a dizzying effect that imbues the simple scenes with uncanny tension. Rather than create atmosphere through claustrophobic camera angles, Ruilova uses sweeping camera movements, shot from below, to tightly encircle the characters. As the camera moves, the same focal point (often on the face or hands) is maintained, causing figures to appear weightless and demonstrating how the viewers' perception of perspective is framed by the camera. At times, it distorts the spatial field; the movement of the camera causes the woman in *Uh Oh* to appear as if she is suspended, her body stiffly swinging back and forth, transformed into a lifeless automaton.

Ruilova's attention to sound extends beyond the individual soundtrack of a video to the exhibition setting for which she carefully creates a dialogue amongst the multiple monitors, as the videos alternate from one to another, resulting in a symphonic score. *Endings* (2005) uses the filmic trope of models used to represent landscapes. Each of the seven roughly rendered, small-scale models is based on an iconic setting from a classic film—each from a scene just prior to the ending, the location that sets up the finale. The reproduced settings in this seven-channel installation include Casa Malaparte from *Contempt* (1963), and scenes from *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *Possession* (1981), among others. The models lack specifying details that would allow the viewer to recognize the reference, as Ruilova instead explores the architectural and spatial vocabulary filmmakers use to organize a scene and establish a mood. Across each landscape or through openings in the models (which, though they may represent windows or doors, resemble tunnels in these rough re-creations) a metal chain is dragged, creating the artwork's soundtrack. Each monitor is in dialogue with the others as one scene responds to another in a complex, disconcerting aural and visual composition. Inconsistent with the scale of the models, the chains take on a surreal quality that activates the scenes. The connotation of restraint transforms each maquette into a slightly sinister landscape.

The quick-editing style of Ruilova's work is common to subliminal advertising, where images flash so rapidly that it is difficult to identify what is being seen. The dizzying, large-scale, two-channel projection *Countdowns* (2004) exemplifies this mechanism, while also exploring the filmic trope of the zoom camera shot. As the title indicates, the numbers 10 to 1 appear in various guises—large plastic red numbers emerge from dense woods; spray painted black numbers appear on a cement wall or tree or dirt pile; numeric birthday candles sit next to a drum kit or in a drainpipe or are held by figures in the same woods and trees; 5 is drawn in the sand on the side of a dune upon which stand red letters that eerily read "Hee hee hee," as a figure clammers up the dune, thereby erasing the digit. As the camera zooms in and out, the landscape of each kaleidoscopic scene appears to be collapsing in on itself. Projected into a corner and combined through swift jump cuts, the result is a disorienting display that envelops the viewer. As the eye jumps from one screen to the other and from odd to even numbers, it is bewildered by slight changes in the settings or sometimes completely new and unexpected scenarios for numbers. Determined to find the logic for what is usually such a simple ritual, the viewer attempts to follow the shifts and interruptions of the sequence, hoping that it will lead to an ultimate conclusion. But the climax never arrives—the sequence repeats, each time with nuanced changes that make the viewer realize that while the scenarios in the enveloping wall-sized projections seem familiar, they are not the same as what came before. Whereas the ritual of a countdown usually leads to a transformation (the start of a film, the launch of a rocket into space, the beginning of a new year) and release, here one feels trapped in



an eternal cycle, like Sisyphus, who was condemned to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down once he reached the top.

The continued relevance of filmmaking tropes fascinates Ruilova. She has featured Jean Rollin, a filmmaker who has devoted himself since the 1960s to depicting the same story over and over throughout his career. Rollin is a French filmmaker of erotic vampire B movies and a hero of Ruilova's. [4] He first appeared in Ruilova's work *Tuning* (2002), which exploits the camera's focus to create an atmosphere of mystery. As the work begins, the screen is blank, a fog, accompanied by the sound of a droning guitar. The scene slowly comes into focus (it is finely tuned, as if an instrument) to reveal a brief glimpse of a young woman (Ruilova) and elderly gentleman (Rollin) seated on a divan, holding hands, before looping back to the hazy screen. The viewer instinctively tries to construct a narrative from the fleeting glance of the nearly static image in an attempt to make sense of the unknown, perhaps wondering whether the elderly man is being held hostage by a desperate fan who has created this tape for ransom. Ruilova's most recent work, entitled *life like* (2006), again features Rollin, depicted here on his deathbed, and the notion of the fan—in this case, the protagonist is so enthralled with the filmmaker's work that she comes to inhabit his images. She is the ultimate fan who absorbs his material; an obsessed admirer who devours, as if one of Rollin's ghoulish characters, her idol's oeuvre. As she visits the locations and interacts with objects from Rollin's films, Ruilova interweaves the video with footage from Rollin's original films that depicted these settings and objects, creating a dialogue between the authors and mediums. The video underscores Ruilova's own devotion to cinematic history and practices, which she adopts in her mesmerizing glances into a dark, anxiety-ridden world.

¹ The 2002 work references the final sequence of Jean-Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), in which the camera continuously follows a wounded woman, but now the tool that created the sequence (the crane) is the featured character—rather than the camera pursuing the woman, it carries her. See Francesco Bonami, *Aida Ruilova 02.3*, exh. brochure (San Antonio: Artpace, 2002).

² Conversation with the author, January 2006.

³ Conversation with the author, January 2006.

⁴ As Ruilova explains, "What's interesting about him is the idea of a director doing the same film over and over again for 30 years." See Karen Rosenberg, "Biennial Favorites," *New York* (March 1, 2004), vol. 37, no. 7, p. 40.