

Cinematic Images of Masculine Vulnerability

Near the beginning of "Bliss and Heaven" (2004), a short film by the Danish artist Jesper Just, a young man crouches at the edge of a wheat field as a trailer truck roars into an open lot next to an electrical substation. The driver, a big middle-aged guy in a trucker hat and, like the young man, wearing a white tank top and worn blue jeans, gets out, looks around as if he knows he's being watched and ambles to the back of the trailer, where he opens the door and climbs in. The young man follows. Once inside, he finds himself in a small, ornate 19th-century music hall.

The older man appears in a spotlight onstage wearing a woman's blond wig and a long, diaphanous scarf. In an extraordinarily deep voice and with great feeling, he proceeds to sing "Please Don't Keep Me Waiting," a song made famous by Olivia Newton-John. It is beautiful and powerfully stirring. Even when he points to the sky and rocks his hips disco-style, his scarf billowing on fan-driven wind, it seems not absurd but urgently expressive.

And when he collapses onstage at the end, as the lights flicker violently, you feel you've witnessed an emotional upheaval of monu-

mental proportions. The young man, visibly moved, rises from his seat in the middle of the hall and applauds slowly and steadily as the film ends.

Included in "Romantic Delusions," an enchanting show of four short films by Mr. Just at the Brooklyn Museum, "Bliss and Heaven" exhibits most of the qualities for which he has become known since completing his studies at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, in 2003. Melodramatic but never campy or over the top and with Hollywood-quality production values, his films probe vulnerable, ordinarily well-armored zones of the masculine psyche like grief, same-sex love, Oedipal conflict and spiritual desire.

Mr. Just has made more than 20 films since 2000, usually involving ambiguous, erotically charged relations between a handsome, blond young man played by Johannes Lilleore and an older man played by various other actors. They represent intense emotional interactions through scenes resembling musical interludes by David Lynch.

It is too bad that more of Mr. Just's short movies couldn't have been included in the exhibition, which was organized by Patrick Amsellem, an associate curator at the museum. What is here, however, makes a fine introduction for viewers unfamiliar with Mr. Just's art.

In "No Man Is an Island" (2002), the young man sits on a park bench and watches an older man dance before him with aban-

Jesper Just
Romantic Delusions
Brooklyn Museum

don. The young man steadily cries throughout; whether this is from sadness or ecstasy is hard to tell.

To read the older man's performance as a kind of mating dance seems obvious, but the age difference adds another dimension. It is like a father-son or teacher-student relationship in which the young man is overawed by the masterly skill demonstrated by his more experienced elder. It is Platonic: the bodily beauty of youth contrasted with the creative agility and spiritual beauty of the old.

The relationship between the old and the young has an almost tragic poignancy in "The Lonely Villa" (2004). One of several elderly men sitting about in silence in a well-appointed library answers the ring of a rotary phone. Across the room the young man sings into his end of the line: "I don't want to set the world on fire. I just want to start a flame in your heart."

To which the older man responds by singing "Address Unknown." (Both are singing Ink Spots hits from the 1930s and '40s.) At the end of the film we hear the older man's plaintive voice through the receiver of the phone that the departed youth has left off the hook. Grown old and cautious, the aging master, doddering away among dusty

books and ancient companions, has lost touch with his impetuous youth. It is heartbreaking, and the singing is gorgeous.

The fourth film, "Romantic Delusions," which Mr. Just only recently completed, differs significantly and in some ways disappointingly from his earlier works. Shot mostly outdoors in Romania in a grainy, documentary style, it consists of three camera angles projected contiguously and focuses on a single character, an anxious-looking, gray-haired man, who, it turns out, has female breasts under the bra and tight-fitting sweater he wears under his track jacket.

He gets off a crowded trolley in a public square, pulls off his jacket and wanders distractedly toward a palatial but derelict Art Nouveau-style former casino. Inside the building is in considerable disrepair, and as the film ends, the man is shown floating, as if in a dream, a couple of inches above the marble floor toward an unknown destination as he sings unintelligibly in a castrato-like voice.

It's not clear what three projections do better than one, other than make the production more like fine art than like Hollywood. And focusing as it does on just one actor, "Romantic Delusions" lacks the psychological and narrative intrigue that Mr. Just's other films have. It seems incomplete, like part of a much longer movie. Perhaps it will turn out to be the start of something new for this still young, abundantly talented and wonderfully original artist.

"Jesper Just: Romantic Delusions" continues through Jan. 4 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, (718) 638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

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