

## BACK

Victoria Miro, London, UK

Jesper Just's films inspire a lot of adjectives. 'Enigmatic', 'atmospheric', 'intense' and 'dramatic' all spring to mind when watching his new film trilogy 'A Voyage in Dwelling' (2008), displayed on three large screens upstairs at Victoria Miro. Yet despite all these words, his films are surprisingly slippery and difficult to define. While there is some sense of narrative within 'A Voyage in Dwelling', and in the other works that Just is showing here, his films more clearly depict moods and might be better characterized as emotional sketches.

Perhaps it's best to begin by describing the action. The three films in 'A Voyage in Dwelling' are linked by a central character, a middle-aged woman played by the Danish actress Benedikte Hansen. The atmosphere throughout the films is one of charged sexuality, appearing in a variety of forms, both physical and psychological. In *A Room of One's Own* (2008), presumably an intentional spin on Virginia Woolf's key feminist essay of 1929, the emphasis is on the carnal, and we find Hansen in a scene of erotic abandonment with a younger man, tumbling and falling in happy ecstasy.

Whether the scene is intended as real or imagined is unclear, but in the next film, *A Question of Silence* (2008), this joy has evaporated and Hansen is found in a stifling (and fully clothed) situation, this time with a middle-aged man. The two sit next to one another, yet there is great distance between them, despite the man's efforts at affection. Half-way through the film a surreal twist is presented, as the man is shown to be holding a ventriloquist's dummy,

Jesper Just  
*A Voyage in Dwelling*  
2008  
Film still

which mimes along to the poignant soundtrack song 'As Morning Holds a Star', sung by US transgender singer/songwriter Baby Dee. Events then take an even stranger turn as one of Hansen's legs falls off, although with little apparent inconvenience to her. Just's meaning here is presumably metaphorical, an illustration of the couple's destructive inability to communicate, and the film undoubtedly suggests that a disturbing dysfunction lies between the two characters.

The eponymous film of the trilogy is the most cinematic of the three, with Hansen found in an Ingmar Bergman-esque setting on a remote island. This is also the most dream-like of the films, with Hansen wading through the shores of the island before entering a house, which then morphs into a ship's interior, where she restlessly roams the corridors alone. The film is highly symbolic, with the lonely setting and lapping sea, an oft-used emblem for female sexuality, suggestive of a psychological journey rather than a literal one.

While Just introduces overt themes of relationships and feminine sexuality within 'A Voyage in Dwelling', he avoids making any narrative conclusions or offering any deeper characterization of his protagonists. Similarly, in *A Vicious Undertow* (2007), also on show at Victoria Miro, he hints at much but reveals little. The film depicts a complex three-way relationship between a middle-aged woman (also played by Hansen), a younger woman and a man, but we are left to draw our own conclusions as to how the situation began and to where it may evolve.

Despite this ambiguity, Just is well aware of the cultural stereotypes attached to gender and age, and appears to enjoy challenging them, emphasizing their limitations. While he was once accused by critics of focusing solely on men within his films, Just's depiction of an older woman exploring ideas of sexuality is a refreshing one, with Hansen's striking performance highlighting how rarely middle-aged women are portrayed in positions of sexual power. Just uses easily recognized codes to suggest overt femininity, both in the way his characters are dressed and in the imagery that surrounds them, yet by emphasizing the complexity of the female perspective he avoids the simple readings these signifiers usually provoke. In 'A Voyage in Dwelling' complex emotions are depicted together within Hansen's character, who simultaneously expresses independence, desire, femininity and strength, giving a depth of personality often lacking in portrayals of women in art and on screen.

Contributing to the power of Just's films are his high production values, giving the works an atmosphere more in keeping with cinema than video art. Working with renowned actors and musicians ('A Voyage in Dwelling' also features an original soundtrack by the composer Dorit Chrysler) gives his films a glossy, alluring feel, which belies the films' complexity. He uses the seductiveness of this style to portray intriguing ideas about relationships and emotional interaction. Far from naturalistic, his films contain a deliberate ambiguity, which, while at times unsettling, allows for an emotional resonance that speaks of a meaning above and beyond mere storytelling.

Eliza Williams



## Jesper Just

James  
Cohan