

Arts

TOPICS ▼

VISUAL ARTS REVIEWS »

Carol Sawyer's Proscenium a ghostly ode to a gilded past

by [Robin Laurence](#) on December 2nd, 2009 at 12:22 PM



Artist Carol Sawyer brings the derelict Pantages Theatre back to life with haunting video and photographs in *Proscenium*.

Carol Sawyer: Proscenium

At Republic Gallery until January 16, 2010

Carol Sawyer has a feeling for what she once called the “melancholy traces of the past”. Whether she is capturing 1890s Strathcona houses in the throes of renovation or 1950s *New Yorker* magazines date-stamped by long-gone librarians, this interdisciplinary artist casts a warm light on small histories that might otherwise have been lost. With her most recent body of work, *Proscenium*, she brings a derelict theatre briefly back to life.

Inspired by a tour she took a couple of years ago of the crumbling interior of the 1908 Pantages Theatre in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, Sawyer has created an evocative performance video in that space, together with a series of photographs. Her poetic conceit in *Proscenium* is the staging of a vaudevillian variety show of the kind that would have been seen at the Pantages in its early days.

Different costumed characters—a magician and his assistant, a ballet dancer, a Shakespearean actor, all played by Sawyer—make their way across the bare stage. They are mostly silent, but the sounds of the contemporary city—sirens, car traffic, the beeping of a reversing truck—leak onto the soundtrack, confronting the past with the present. Another contrast, that between wealth and poverty, so pertinent to this formerly glorious and gilded theatre in the troubled Downtown Eastside, is realized in the singing of an old English round that is essentially a begging song.

Disembodied actions occur: a drum beats, cymbals roll across the stage, balls are pitched from unseen hands. Occasionally the characters perform: the dancer twirls and twirls until she collapses, the magician pulls a long line of coloured scarves out of his assistant’s gloved hand. The characters are determined stereotypes and the tricks are intentionally obvious. Often, however, they take tentative steps onto the stage, then retreat or wander about as if searching for a line to recite, a song to sing, a fiction to take part in. At times, their shadows are at odds with their actions, enhancing the ghostly mood.

In her exhibition statement, Sawyer writes about her ongoing interest in “the melancholic power of the fragment; the pleasures of illusion; and the persistent desire to believe what we see.” Shot from distant, unmoving cameras, the video makes visible the entire proscenium arch, the footlights, and the unadorned stage all the way to the back doors. It places us high up and far back, in the gods, and the performers are reduced to tiny, flickering figures.

This point of view is enhanced by the way the work is presented, on a small monitor mounted on the wall. It’s disrupted, however, by Sawyer’s use of a split screen, which messes with illusionistic space. The split screen enables the characters to double themselves, or to disappear into the barely visible centre seam. Again, the stagecraft is consciously obvious and cheesy, posing the Brechtian idea of the alienation effect against our longing to believe the theatrical magic.

Also disruptive is Sawyer's series of colour photos of the characters off-stage. Slumped in chairs, looking tired and dispirited, with hair pins, bra straps, and gender disguises showing, they speak again of the reality behind the illusion, the contrivance behind the representation. It's a wonderful and strangely moving project.

GEORGIA STRAIGHT

[History](#) | [About Us](#) | [Masthead](#) | [Careers](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Covers](#) | [Guides](#) | [Where to Find Us](#)

LEGAL

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#)

© 2024 VANCOUVER FREE PRESS. BEST OF VANCOUVER, BOV AND GOLDEN PLATES ARE TRADE-MARKS OF VANCOUVER FREE PRESS PUBLISHING CORP.