

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

ALEJANDRO CESARCO

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MURRAY GUY

by brian boucher

NEW YORK In his latest New York solo, young New York-based Uruguayan artist Alejandro Cesarco exhibited two short 16mm films transferred to DVD, both in Spanish (with English subtitles), that address literature and translation, history and memory. "Two Films" coincided with his exhibition "Three Works" at Tanya Leighton in Berlin. Both included the 2008 film *Everness* (12 minutes), which in New York was shown along with the 6-minute 2009 film *Zeide Isaac*.

According to press materials, the black-and-white *Everness* (titled for a Borges poem about infinity) liberally interprets a scene from James Joyce's "The Dead," replacing Joyce's elderly protagonists with a sexy young couple, and introducing a more self-consciously intellectual tone. Where Joyce's story revolves around two Irish ballads sung by the characters, Cesarco alternates the narrative scenes with shots of records playing two solemn songs, one Brazilian, one Spanish.

The film opens with a young man offering his theory of tragedy, which he defines as "the arrival of an enigmatic and supernatural message that the hero fails to fully and timely comprehend." In his description, this message contains "a word that has the power to change one's life." This is followed by a tense scene featuring the young man and his silent, standoffish wife that remakes the final section of Joyce's story. In the original passage, the narrator broods over mortality and despairs for his marriage after learning about his wife's vivid memories of a childhood love, Michael Furey, who died after leaving his sickbed for just a glimpse of her face. Whether or not we recognize the source, which is not identified, it is as if we've come into an independent film partway through, though the male protagonist's jealousy and insecurity are clear enough.

In the final scene, the young couple share breakfast silently and with seeming tenderness. How or whether their relationship has been restored is unclear, as is the import for the couple of the opening discourse on tragedy. Even for viewers unaware of the work's translation of an Irish short story to a Spanish-language high-concept art piece, the film's extended takes and narrative ambiguities are satisfying and intriguing.

Addressing a far more daunting subject is the color film *Zeide Isaac*, which features the artist's 94-year-old grandfather (*zeide* in Yiddish), a Holocaust survivor who reads a thoughtful but troubling text on which the two collaborated. We see the old man in a modest domestic setting, silently reading or gazing into the camera, while in a voiceover he expresses the will to testify to the camps' horrors, but also acknowledges the limits of testimony. Though every experience of the camps is unique, he acknowledges, each narration of those events is codified; facts and memory compete, and, over time, retellings change memory itself.

We may regret the passing of the Holocaust's last survivors, as Joyce's narrator in "The Dead" dreads his own demise. But even the survivors' memories, Cesarco argues, are already corrupted by the very act of their recitation.

Photo: Alejandro Cesarco: Everness, 2008, 16mm film transferred to DVD, 12 minutes; at Murray Guy.