Aïda Ruilova


Ruilova’s work has been featured in numerous international film festivals and museum exhibitions—including the 2004 Whitney Biennial and the 50th Venice Biennale—as well as in exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City; White Columns, New York; and the Moore Space, Miami. In 2006, Ruilova was shortlisted for the Guggenheim Hugo Boss Prize.

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Cover image:
life like (still), 2006

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Aïda Ruilova
The Singers; 1999 – New

New York-based artist Aïda Ruilova’s videos combine classical cinematic devices with a distinctively low-tech sensibility, quick cuts and rhythmic, jarring soundtracks to create works that exist in the space between sound and image. One of a young generation of artists who employs media in innovative ways with a do-it-yourself aesthetic, Ruilova draws upon contexts—like cinema, music, and popular culture—that exist outside the art world. For her first solo museum exhibition, she presents a comprehensive survey of her single-channel video work, in a choreographed installation that becomes something altogether new.

Largely characterized by dark, confined interiors and lone protagonists suspended in chronic states of psychic distress, Ruilova’s videos reveal an attention, in fairly equal measure, to structures of music, performance, and film. A founder and one-time member of the experimental band Alva, Ruilova is keenly aware of the place of sound in her pieces, where single, screeching vocals and repeated one-liners (often marking each work’s title) are cut and compounded into slashing, percussive pulses. Slicing and rescultping each layer of agonized expression and desolate whimper—and in steadfast refusal of any satisfied resolution—Ruilova presents a dissonant composition of contained hysterias. In this symphony of moving image and sound, a perpetually sustained crescendo of suspense inevitably creeps into our own physical space. The hysterical impulse remains a central motif in these works, where Ruilova often captures her unstrung characters in chronic fits of frenzy and torment, and heightens the effect with an electrified assemblage of clipped shots. In Oh no (1999-2000), You’re pretty (1999), Beat & Perv (1999), Hey (1999), and no no (2004), Ruilova emphasizes the compressed atmosphere within each frame, further constricted by the work’s elliptical structure.

While mirrored images and repeated clips offer a low-tech solution to synchronized movement and sound, Ruilova’s abrupt and fractured editing, coupled with the uneven beat, resists a steady tempo and uniform, linear composition. Ruilova’s actors, chanting compulsively between irregular beats—a twisted take on the music video genre—offer a dark approach to their percussive performances. The narrow stairwell and stone basement, with peeling paint and rickety banisters, also operate as main characters. These confined sites, in which her actors are posed in various stages of arrest or captivity, offer little space for escape from the closed frame. These structures, however, all work to amplify what is a ruling vision in Ruilova’s work—a fascination for the macabre.

Looking to the Soviet vanguard films of Sergei Eisenstein, Andrei Tarkovsky, Roger Corman B-movies, and her horror-genre mentor Jean Rollin—Ruilova relies on the central role played by interior space as a psychic construct, transformed in her videos as unstable sites of fear or foreboding. While these derelict stairwells and dank cellars might heighten the sense of the captive frame, so, too, do they offer an otherworldly realm, where claustrophobic private space bodes a more sinister nightmare. For many of these early works, Ruilova centers on her personal fascination with the French horror director Rollin, whose erotic vampire films, for three decades,