



Above: Emily Wardill, *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck*, 2007.
16 mm color film, 12 minutes. Photo courtesy of the artist, Altman-Siegel, San Francisco,
STANDARD (OSLO), Oslo, and Jonathan Viner/Fortescue Avenue London.

Emily Wardill: *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wrecks and Wrecks*

Emily Wardill's 2007 film *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wrecks and Wrecks* suggests how stained glass windows from the Middle Ages—the years between 400 and 1500—presented lessons to the illiterate masses on morality and virtue and how visual forms of mass media function similarly today. The work features such characteristic aspects of the artist's practice as elaborately constructed theatrical sets and deliberately esoteric acting methods used to evoke the complex nature of contemporary social interaction and interpersonal communication. Wardill's use of these techniques exaggerates the artificiality of her films as a way to focus attention both on the details of her stagecraft and the ideas and rhetoric presented in the text of her films' dialogue and voice-overs. Her deliberate presentation of her films on celluloid (rather than transferring them to video) not only situates her practice within a tradition of experimental and vanguard

cinema practice, but also provides an additional visual and sonic texture and atmosphere experienced by the viewer within the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis' Main Gallery space.

Sick Serena and Dregs and Wrecks and Wrecks begins with cropped images of stained glass windows from English gothic churches and cathedrals accompanied by choral music common to Christian mass services. The music stops abruptly – the first of many sharp sonic and visual cuts made by Wardill—and a stained glass image of a boy holding a candle is instantly replaced by a living equivalent. The boy is one of four protagonists in the film, including a young bearded man, dressed alternately in a robe and a track-suit, who we discover is named Amira, and two costumed women, one of whom repeats the other to create a makeshift "echo" effect. The characters are featured interacting with one another,

often through halted spoken phrases, or engaged in other, sometimes strange activities—for example, Amira jumps on an image of an angelic figure on the floor and begins to writhe upon it and pound his fists on its face. These scenes do not tell a particular story but alternate with the still images set to the sound of the choral voice, bits of dialogue spoken by the actors, and, the words of 19th century art critic John Ruskin (British, 1819-1900), to evoke both the fragmented visual appearance and experience of looking at and "reading" stained glass windows.

The film's title, *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wrecks and Wrecks*, was inspired by Wardill having seen the phrase "sex and drugs and rock and roll" miswritten as "sex and drugs and rock and rock" in graffiti on a wall in Cuba. The original phrase has become commonplace in contemporary language and is typically used to describe the cultivation of a rebellious, liberated, and even dangerous life at odds with conventional moral standards. Wardill's adaption of the miswritten version of the phrase retains the moral implications of the original while shifting our expectations of the film's possible narrative and content to conjure a scenario involving an invalid (Sick Serena), social undesirables (dregs), and examples of literal material and/or figurative human destruction (wrecks and wrecks). While actual events in the film do not correspond directly to the title, the often unsettling actions of the characters or the frequently disturbing content of their dialogue do suggest an overall sense of dysfunction. Wardill juxtaposes images and sounds associated with sacred religious places with scenes that feature more profane

and awkwardly humorous examples or descriptions of human behavior to emphasize the perpetual discrepancy between our moral and spiritual aspirations and our frailties, weaknesses, and ultimate fallibility.

The techniques utilized to create and present the film strongly affect our understanding of its examination of the way visual forms of communication are used to shape and control society and human behavior—both historically and in the present day. Wardill's use of the medium of film is critical given its association with the social nature of the cinema—a condition that she intensifies by strategically placing the screen in the corner of the Contemporary's Main Gallery space to create an actively collective audience experience. The actors' intentionally stilted delivery of the dialogue combines with props and scenery more reminiscent of live theater than film to establish the film as a noticeably "constructed" experience. This runs contrary to the way that mainstream narrative films and television drama create a more imaginary and synthetic experience to encourage the passive consumption of visual information. *Sick Serena Dregs and Wrecks and Wrecks* ultimately suggests how we have been instructed to understand the world through images and serves as a reminder of the power that images possess to convey and control meaning and the urgent need to question and even resist that authority.



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