

# The critics

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**FILM** When film moves out of the theatre and into the museum, 'art house' takes on a whole new meaning. A new exhibition will show how the moving image has been quietly expanding cinema's scope, writes **Andrew Stephens**.

## Popcorn goes the easel

**T**HERE IS A SCENE in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) when Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) angrily defaces a self-portrait she has painted for her former fiancée, control-freak Scottie (James Stewart). Midge tears at her hair in anguish, calling herself "stupid, stupid", because Scottie, whom she still fancies, hates the painting.

It is a dramatic clip by itself, but in Tracey Moffatt's 10-minute film *Artist* (2000) it is a fragment of something much more frenetic. Moffatt's film is a clever, fast-paced assemblage of scenes, such as the *Vertigo* clip, from dozens of films, that film buffs will squeal over. It blends various themes — the woman artist, the crazy artist, the genius artist and the impassioned artist — but mostly it is about the interface between art-making and cinema.

Film, of course, is one of the visual arts. But when it is consciously constructed to be shown in an art gallery — as opposed to being popcorn entertainment in a multiplex — our watching eyes can adopt a whole new reverence that we might not reserve for a flick at the Nova or the Kino. Our perception of what constitutes so-called high or low cultural value is, after all, a soft currency that fluctuates according to context.

That's why *Artist* is so refreshing: it's witty, charming and entertaining but also seriously thoughtful. By taking clips from what is ostensibly pop culture — mostly B-grade films — and reconstituting them into a mini-thesis, the wily Moffatt messes up the boundaries.

The film is on a loop at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) at Southbank, along with other pieces of landmark art cinema such as Andy Warhol's eight-hour epic *Empire* (1964), a film of the Empire State Building, shot from the 44th floor of the nearby Time-Life Building. Viewers with a bit of time on their hands will delight in it, while more impatient buffs will get a charge from pieces such as *Artist*, trying to identify a flurry of cinema references.

Juliana Engberg is one of those buffs. She is ACCA's artistic director and she chortles excitedly at the *Vertigo* clip when she shows me *Artist*. She asks whether I, too, spent my youth watching old films (absolutely). But it is plain, as we look at more of *Artist* and other artworks in this new exhibition, called *Cinema Paradiso*, that Engberg is like a walking archive: she has an astonishingly keen visual memory, within which film-buffness is a mere sub-category.

Over many years of keeping an eye on works shown by the world's top contemporary art galleries, she has tucked memories of certain moving-image art pieces away into a mental box marked "Cinema Things". The result is this show, filling the two huge rooms at ACCA.

*Cinema Paradiso* is what Engberg describes as "a romp"

rather than "a heavy thesis" show. But it's not just for the film buffs (though they will be sated): there is much else to ponder.

There are action-packed highs: Monica Bonvicini's two-channel video installation *Destroy She Said* (1998) and Moffatt's new disaster-film themed assemblage *Doomed* (2007), another collaboration with Gary Hillberg, who helped with *Artist*.

And there is slow pensiveness: Portuguese artist Joao Penalva's film *The Bell-Ringer* (2005) and Hiroshi Sugimoto's exquisitely resonant time-lapse photographs of old US theatre interiors, shot in the late 1970s and the early '90s.

Engberg says curating a show such as this means there must be visual peaks and lulls: film, obviously, taxes the eyes more greedily than does a still painting or photograph. Tempo and duration are significant, she reckons, and many curators don't give enough thought to "swell and ebb", particularly in bigger exhibitions. "You have to take people on a journey with catharsis and edge," she advises. "It's a skill."

The journey in *Cinema Paradiso* does this. Take, for example, the lustrous works by Cindy Sherman, whose legendary self-portraits — though they are much more than that — impersonate film stills. Here she is in black-and-white, smoking, before a fireplace like some early '60s melodrama screen queen; over there, she is the colourful femme fatale in what might have been a Douglas Sirk production. And there, is she a Hitchcock heroine or a Hitchcock victim?

**S**HERMAN'S TOYING with identity — she is photographer, model, actor and director, object and subject — also raises questions about how moving image technology allows audiences to enter multiple fictional worlds in a different way to that offered by two-dimensional works.

"The media now has enabled us to see so much that we would never have experienced as a 17th or 18th-century person," Engberg reflects. "Psychologically, it's very interesting because it means that almost all experiences are somehow available to us, even though they are not necessarily 'true' experiences; they're simulated experiences. It has enlarged our whole image repertoire. A lot of these artists are interested in that and in the construction of identity."

No wonder, then, that Michael Rush writes in his compendium *Video Art* (2003) that the moving image's emergence in the late 19th century came with the fury of a comet "exploding all earlier forms of image-making" such as painting, drawing and photography. While it certainly didn't replace those forms, it has given our visual expectations a wider lens by toying with the space once dominated by the painted canvas. *Cinema Paradiso* skilfully demonstrates this by juxtaposing film and video with many photographs (Sherman, Sugimoto and Edward Ruscha) and

with the miniature drive-in paintings by Callum Morton.

*Empire*, in particular, comfortably occupies an in-between territory and Engberg describes its quiet contemplation of the famous building from dusk to early morning (2.42am) one day in 1964 as "a form of urban sublime". She once watched five hours of it at an LA museum. Some might think it boring, but it resembles a very slow-moving painting and is a long way from the welter of irritating video art — low on spirit, high on tricked-up effects and attitude — that is too frequently found in galleries four decades later.

That's why it's a great joy to see works such as Sugimoto's sumptuous photographs of cinema interiors. These gentle images draw us into that evocative space — the plush cinema — that so echoes my own ideas of what the mind, if it could be made visible, might look like. Much has been written about the "dream screen" — when the cinema experience echoes the dream world — and looking at Sugimoto's photos, there is something of an arresting dreamscape, deep in the brain's interior, about them. They are slightly foreboding, perhaps on the way to an anxiety-riddled David Lynch.

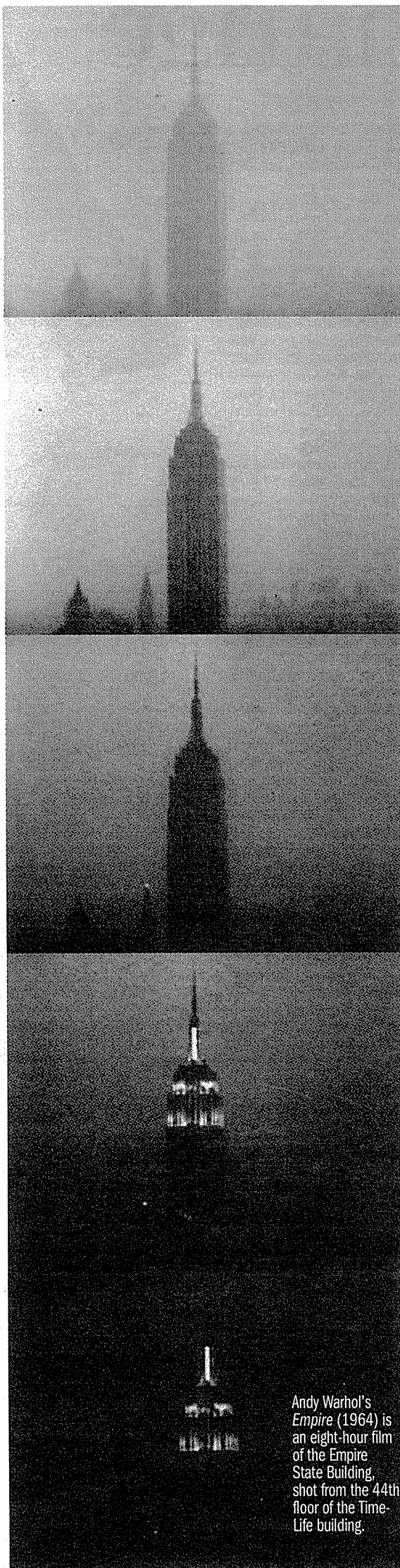
Using time-lapse, this Japanese artist has shot the interiors and the films being shown — at Hollywood's Cinerama Dome, Culver City's Studio Drive-In, Detroit's Fox City, New York's Radio City Music Hall and so on — so that the screen ends up as nothing more than a brilliant blur of bright light. Even so, as Sugimoto pointed out to Engberg, the glowing white screens give some hint of the films that were being shown when the photos were taken: "happy" films are brighter white in colour while the melancholic ones are greyer. In these images, Engberg says, the screen becomes "a kind of Zen containment of emotions".

**I**T IS HERE THAT ONE OF *Cinema Paradiso*'s most interesting themes emerges: the idea of the artist or filmmaker as shaman or seer, who we want to reveal to us our own internal dream screens, the psychological landscape we must deal with daily. "Society wants artists to be like that," says Engberg, getting onto the subject of French theorist Jacques Lacan's famous "mirror stage" in psychoanalysis, where the ego is awoken during infancy when one's image is first seen in a mirror.

"(People) almost need artists to conform to a concept of craziness," she says. "This is rather Lacanian, but we need the mirror to be disrupted. We don't want to see the quite plain image of ourselves: we like to see distortion, it helps us move on."

Given the intensity and the enjoyable accessibility of the cinematic art she's putting on in this show, there might be quite a bit of "moving on" happening down at Southbank during the next seven weeks. That, after all, is the dream-screen effect.

*Cinema Paradiso* is at ACCA, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank. October 16-December 2.



Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) is an eight-hour film of the Empire State Building, shot from the 44th floor of the Time-Life building.