

## ART REVIEW

## 'Planes of Memory' a Weighty Video Exhibit

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"Planes of Memory" is video curator Jacqueline Kain's first major exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art and it's a serious matter. Bearing the weight of history and wearing the vestments of high art, the show of early works by Bruce Nauman, Peter Campus and Beryl Korot is a strait-laced, black-and-white affair, designed for purists.

Visitors who come to the museum looking for pretty things or juicy forms of self-expression may be disappointed. Finding no word of guidance or background information, some will conclude that nothing at all is going on at the museum while others will shrug, "I don't get it."

That is unfortunate, but one can make a case for austerity. The particular examples of video art on display (to Feb. 28) are more attuned to '70s Minimalism, Conceptualism and performance art than to any Populist notion of life with television. There's human content in the three video pieces, but it tends to be pared down to a structural essence and it requires some effort on the part of the viewer.

"Good luck finding the image," Kain said as I disappeared into a re-creation of Peter Campus' 1975 installation, called "mem." Apart from a video projector and a red light, the dark room appears to be empty. But as you walk along the wall nearest the projector, a fluttering light pattern (a greatly enlarged image of your hair) appears to the right and a soft shadow of your body on the left. "Got it," you think, but the images quickly fade as you venture into a far corner.

Wandering back to try it again, you are suddenly aware of a human presence. It turns out to be you—stretched fun-house-mirror wide and provocatively elusive but definitely recognizable. As you approach yourself, you find it impossible to effect an eye-to-eye meeting; no matter how you move, your image always looks away from the real you. This drives narcissists crazy, but others find it an intriguing psychological study. At the very least, the piece brings up familiar questions on the fleeting nature of appearances and the difficulty of confronting oneself even in the privacy of a dark room.

Nauman's 1969 "Live Taped Video Corridor" entails a quicker trip in more disturbing circumstances. He has installed two video monitors at the dead end of a claustrophobic hall, so narrow that you feel compelled to turn slightly sideways when approaching the TV sets. As you proceed, a rear view of yourself appears on the lower monitor while the upper one pictures the empty corridor. You seem to be walking away from yourself.

Ominous and creepy, the piece seems to speak of Big Brother and corridors of sterile institutions that lead nowhere. Seen more objectively, "Live Taped Video Corridor" reads as a formal abstraction, with a technological wonder appearing as a jewel or a flicker of light and life within a rigid structure. But if Renaissance perspective gives paintings a window on the world, the vanishing point of this video installation is a mirror on the self at its most constricted.

Upstairs, where Korot shows her 1974 video work, "Dachau," you can assume the couch potato position

and simply watch. But there's no real rest because you must watch four screens simultaneously (for 24 minutes) and the subject—though dryly treated—is not pleasant. Korot presents the World War II concentration camp (near Munich) as a tourist attraction where somber crowds trudge along fences and peer into bunks. Despite the people, the place is eerily quiet and prim, with long barracks bordering a central square. Eventually you arrive at the gas chamber where oven doors stand open. Just beyond, a stream bubbles along one side of the complex and disappears into an idyllic landscape.

No narrative accompanies this restrained view of a 20th-Century horror. Instead, Korot conceives of the piece as woven fabric. Both warp and woof are paired images; in the lineup of four screens, the first and third usually present scenes that contrast with the second and fourth. Like Nauman's work, Korot's images and multiple channel format are presented in a Minimal, geometric structure that intensifies troubling content by packaging it neatly.

The premise of "Planes of Memory" is that video art—however youthful—has a history. The point is well taken. If nothing else, the exhibition reminds us that a handful of artists, working with relatively primitive equipment, pulled off rigorous work that holds up very well indeed now that the medium has reached young adulthood.