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Joe Sola: Cliffhanger

OTINO CORSANO

Joe Sola documents the interior screening room of collective film memories. Akin to Steve McQueen's homage to Buster Keaton, *Deadpan* (1997), Sola's video-based performances deploy tactics of vulnerability and implied danger to draw viewers in, affording them a front-row view of themselves. Often featuring the artist in the title roles, these redux snippets of old movies transform the inner eye's Hollywood landscape into a noirish palimpsest of flashbacks and rude awakenings, those defining moments



of what F. Scott Fitzgerald once called "romantic readiness." Sola's insight into the Dream Factory as a tangled weave of internal projections or cuttings of the real world also alludes to his unique brand of "cinematic therapy," suggesting that we can all dissect our film experiences and relationships rather than swallow them whole.

Three of Sola's early videos—*Come Ons* (2000), *GoGoGo* (2001), and *Climaxes 1966-2001* (2002)—were



appropriated from action films. Campy exposés of how Hollywood recycles itself, and how this in turn reinforces its signature style of filmmaking, their editing also bears traces of Sol LeWitt's wall works or Lawrence Weiner's open-ended text pieces, art that unfolds itself from a prescribed set of instructions. On the surface, the trilogy deconstructs the imprint of movie male heroes upon the psychology of masculine identity, linking it via a feedback mechanism to popular media, yet underwriting all three videos is Sola's stock project of reducing the anatomy of film identification to classic Pavlovian conditioning. This established

debt to Chris Burden's 1971 performance piece *Shoot* emerged in Sola's first solo exhibition, "Taking a Bullet" (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, October 5 – December 31, 2005 and Atlanta College of Art Gallery, January 6 – March 5, 2006), in which he gives the generalized Tinsel Town neurasthenia a requisite "shot in the arm."

After early stints at MTV, working on *Snowed In*, *House of Style* and various rockumentaries, Sola unplugged himself from the television business. During this time he produced his own community access program, *IN PHASE*, which was cablecast in Brooklyn, Philadelphia, and



Joe Sola, (clockwise from top) *Room With Adult Video Playthings*, 2002, audio video with video, 1:25 min, Saint Louis, Missouri, 2002, audio video with video, 5:07 min, Male Fashion Models Walk Through an Art, Audio Arts Cultural Center, San Diego, 2005. Photo Maurizio Attia. *Cliffhanger* and *Artists' Chris Burden, Shoot*, 1971.

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New Orleans, before going on to receive an MFA from Otis College in 1999. Since then, Sola's videos, installations, performances, and works on paper have been exhibited internationally, including a second solo show, "Grin and Bear It," at the Wexner Center this past spring. With all this attention, Sola's projects have naturally grown in ambition and budget, though they still avoid escapist fantasy or elaborate sets to get their point across. Accordingly, no one is alarmed to see Sola tackled by football players in his *Saint Henry Composition* (2001), because this really is the artist himself, risking personal injury for art's sake. Yet Sola's minimalist screen persona has a cutting edge, ultimately denying spectators escape into either traditional sports fare or gay porn.

In a similar vein, *Riding with Adult Video Performers* (2002) features David

Forest Entertainment "Men" Ken Ryker, Caesar, and Jeremy Tucker. Seated in two cars of a large wooden roller coaster at Six Flags/Great Adventure in Valencia, CA, the four occupants are shown reacting as their cars start to plummet. This short, single shot of Sola out with the guys has direct human appeal, like any family home video. The artist chose strong, well-built guys who easily fit the action hero mold, but shot them in an unfamiliar context, exchanging the standard porn climax for amusement park thrills. "In narrative structure," says Sola, "whether it is mainstream or pornography, everything focuses on the climax." Just like porn, the sheer intensity of the ride obviates the need for acting, which is neatly summarized by the usual tagline, "Porn stars can't act." Indeed, the roller coaster is a perfect emblem of the sublime, for every

rider is a potential cinemagoer, navigating in the dark between the risk of disaster and the relative safety of their seats, like any movie theater. Rather than merely reproducing this fear, Sola reenacts memory's innate cliffhanger.

Sola's 35mm film transferred to DVD, *Army ranger reaching for new spirit warrior (from mankind project) near Mulholland Drive, Los Angeles* (2005), operates immediately as a film vault or Cineplex in the round. With smoggy lights glinting in the background, the two-minute loop offers a dramatic closeup of two disembodied hands straining toward each other in a string of failed rescue attempts. Involving some unidentified "cliffhanger," these forever divided hands become even more disturbing due to the stock action adventure soundtrack (composed and recorded by Michael Webster) interspliced with sounds of

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crickets chirping, all of which builds to a harrowing anti-climax at regular intervals. Designed to trigger and then defuse inner emotional turmoil, the gap in this film between the hand that kills and the hand that heals remains symbolically open.

The artist admits to having experienced similar dislocations on movie sets, like the time he became stuck in a pretend traffic jam or witnessed a rooftop shootout with stunt pistols. This alienation effect caused when the *Metropolis*-style memory bank merges with the everyday landscape was the inspiration for his new *Coming of Age* (2005) series

of watercolors. Transposing familiar locations into the framework of standard feature movies, these quiet monochromatic paintings scroll through the artist's obsession with coming-of-age films, harking back to a time when Sola first saw images of what it means to be a man. Joe has even been known to snap his fingers like the Fonz when walking through automatic doors at airports or grocery stores, impishly channeling this former icon of TV magic.

Last year, Sola hired a group of runway fashion models to appear at the Angels Gate Cultural Center in San Pedro. The

shirtless, muscle-laden studs created big, broad expressionistic wallworks and sculptures, transgressing the traditional boundaries defining the work of art. A repeat performance at the Atlanta College of Art attracted a more substantial budget, allowing Sola to hire models from Elite Model Management, one of the country's top agencies. He set a few simple rules for the project: all the material provided must be used, everything must be done up on the stage, and no fewer than half of the models must be shirtless at any time. For the performance's reprise at LACE, Sola subbed



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in five professional actors, basically instructing them to strut their stuff on a two-inch plywood stage. In all three performances, Sola supplies his players with standard art school materials, so that everything ends up looking like outsider or neo-junk art. Although Sola clearly intends to suggest that even models and actors can make art, as the putative director of a public space that benevolently turns creative freedom into a reality show, Sola's gesture is, to say the least, ironic. At the limit, vouchsafing his players' art as authentic is but a strategic Duchampian dig at antiquarian endowment.

To date, Sola has performed *Studio Visit* (2004-05) dozens of times at his Mt. Washington studio. On an impulse, Sola will inform a visiting curator, critic, or dealer that he doesn't show his artwork often, and asks permission to videotape the occurrence. What transpires stays within accepted parameters until

Sola suddenly jumps out of a nearby window, crashing through a concealed breakaway. This alarming switch from normal business to high drama, needless to say, makes for strangely unnerving documents. But with this weird little stunt, Sola is able to cut the ties between cinema and life, audience and performer, individual and landscape, cinematic fantasy and constructed reality, inserting in one fell swoop a time-honored cinematic cliché into the highly structured art world environment. Or maybe he's just



trying to avoid set expectations and putting his art career on the line, simply bailing out in the middle of it all. Either way, dusting off broken shards while chuckling to himself, we see Sola making his way back up to the studio to continue the discussion.

For some time now Sola has been proposing a work titled *Car Crash*, involving the artist driving a rigged stunt car into the side of a major art institution. One can understand a personal motivation for this work, given that Sola once jumped through literal hoops to master safety glass under the guidance of a veteran Valley stuntman. But it also has to be admitted that it is only a matter of time before some museum will be happy to exhibit this Hollywood-style scenario of its own destruction.

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