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Casino deathwatch

Catherine Borg's Vegas hotel implosion fetish

by JARRET KEENE

ARTIST Catherine Borg's nearly 11-minute digital video installation titled "I only have stars for you; you only have stars for me" stands as perhaps one of the most disturbing accounts of a hotel-casino implosion ever documented -- not because of what is captured visually (we've all seen an implosion before), but because of the film's audio track, which the artist conveniently transcribes and presents as subtitles. The video, centerpiece of an untitled exhibit now on display in the Contemporary Arts Collective through November, features footage of last year's (March 13) implosion of the Stardust hotel-casino married to the morbid yet fascinating revelry of people who have nothing better to do on a Tuesday evening than watch something on the Strip get dynamited.

Of course, the Stardust implosion was a genuine spectacle, to which the thousands of dollars in fireworks blown up that night attests. Still, watching the historic structure -- it was, after all, the last of the mobster-run casinos -- come down as faceless revelers cheer on its demise gets a tad creepy at times, even as the sublime aura of destruction echoes through the viewer's imagination. This is, in its own aesthetic way, a snuff film, one in which everyone -- from the demolishers to the partygoers to the artist to the audience -- is implicated, and from which there really isn't any chance of escaping once you've seen it.

Interestingly, Borg worked on the video piece during an East Coast residency, where she showed it to peers who knew nothing of Vegas locale or inside jokes. As a result, she made the decision to transcribe the audio for the benefit of viewers outside of Vegas who might not, for instance, comprehend what the term "dust hole" means in the Vegas Valley. (It's part of a government ad campaign catch phrase, "Don't be a dust hole!", urging motorists not to stir up dust in the valley.) Indeed, the partygoers' banter is funny and witty, and they talk like they've attended and found pleasure at quite a few implosions. Shades of J.G. Ballard's Crash!

In any case, Borg insists that standing less than 100 yards from the implosion wasn't as loud as one might think, mainly because her proximity to the event didn't give the sound waves sufficient distance to develop. "It was probably louder downtown than it was from my vantage," she insists. "But at a close distance, it's an intense physical experience."

Adding to the powerful images of detonation are more poetic touches, like Borg's big foam stars being launched into the neon-smear night sky courtesy of several black balloons. Indeed, stars provide a recurring motif for the show, which also includes a series of illuminated Duratrans ("Variable Stars 1-6") and a gallery of drawings ("Analogues"). Another lyrical touch involves Borg and friends throwing a bash in the Stardust on the last evening it was

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Catherine Borg's Untitled

Tue.-Sat., 12-5 p.m.; through Nov. 26
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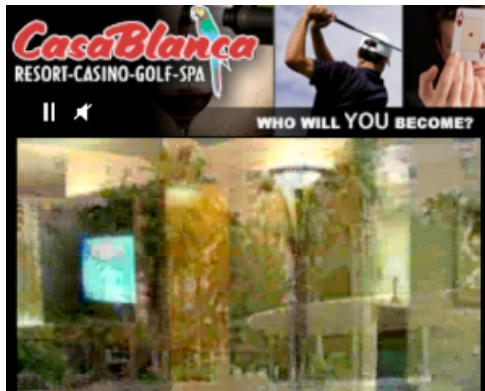


A video image from Catherine Borg's *Untitled* exhibit

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open for business. There, in a rented hotel room, she and her artistic pals presented a one-night arts and culture show. Within this context, Borg's fascination with the Stardust (and stars and dust) and darkness punctuated by bits of light begins to border on obsession. Until you notice the other works in the gallery.

One is called "Adventure Nonfiction: Tracking the Void," which offers three silent videos, tracking shots of three different locations: the Strip (southbound), the Fremont District and the old and abandoned Aztec locals casino on the edge of Commercial Center. The videos, presented simultaneously on three screens, resonate with the idea of Vegas being perhaps the most amazingly recorded space in the world, what with all the surveillance, the tourist cameras and constant media attention.

"Every person on the Strip seems to have a camera," says Borg. "They taped us taping them. Unless you put down a tripod, though, no one's going to hassle you for recording things."

There was Borg with her digital video camera capturing the chaos of a busy night by relying on a mount on the window of an automobile, her friend driving her along, stopping when the cars in front of them stop and not when, for instance, a blinking helicopter crammed with tourists catapults into the sky.

"All the delays or pauses in movement are due to traffic," she clarifies. "Each video is just one long, continuous take from a moving car."

The other significant piece here is "Self-tending," a stop-motion animation of clear-cast resin blocks that build and unbuild themselves. For Borg, the one-minute, looped video suggests a hospitality world that's coming, where (perhaps tongue in cheek, she admits) architects will take their profession to a whole new level of constantly moving structures, much like the one Borg achieves here courtesy of some old-school techniques. Whether building it up or breaking it down, it's obvious she uses her work as a way of exploring ideas about Vegas, as a location of massive destruction and of limitless creation.

"[Structures that self-alter] could be the next development in high-end resorts in places like Vegas and Dubai," she adds. "It will be the next phase in branded architecture."

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