

# In vacuum

## Catherine Borg explores the terror of empty space

[Danielle Kelly](#)

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Catherine Borg's new exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Collective is scary.

Catherine Borg's new exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Collective is scary. It's called *Untitled*, the perfect name for an exhibition that relentlessly tackles the immense terror of nothingness. Horror vacui, horror films and the horror of the sublime: This exhibition looks at the frightening vastness of space, and how and why we fill it. In videos, drawings and photos, Borg unforgivingly addresses what it means to live and work in Las Vegas. It is one of the best shows of the year.

In the front left gallery, two videos are shown in a loop: "I only have stars for you; you only hold stars for me" and "Experiment Phantom Area." In tandem, one emphasizes the urgent horror of the other. And it's brutal.

A collaboration with New York-based artist Amy Yoes, "Experiment ..." documents various interior and exterior architectures of Las Vegas. Nighttime images are taken from a number of locations Downtown, and indoor shots include footage of the Peppermill, where the video was first screened in 2006. Nocturnally dominated by neon, the elements themselves are abstracted and isolated, often seen as reflections or refractions of their original design and place. For example, an element that appears to be an illuminated castle-like detail from a building becomes neon Rorschach, a flying red angular butterfly. Harmless enough until the butterfly begins to inhale, and the screen becomes one massive breathing architectural abstraction. Shapes flutter, and space becomes thick, so that what is at first flat becomes deep, almost muscular.

This is a horror film. The video's soundtrack is integral to this sensation, manipulating emotions and anticipation. The combined vernaculars of neon, fabricated interiors and abstract painting are mind-bending. The experience becomes one of '70s sci-fi, with architecture as automaton and space coming alive—literally.

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Beyond the *Weekly*

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The bittersweet beginning of Borg's "I only have stars for you ..." belies its impending violence. On the surface, the piece is a consideration of the implosion of the Stardust and the nature of spectacle. It also hints at the precarious vulnerability of art-making, and the preciousness of memory. In tribute to its namesake, the piece begins with the clumsy release of a bundle of floating balloons attached to a lonely, handcrafted atomic star. What proceeds is a split-screen interchange between images of that night's spectacle and modest images of Borg's staged attempts at honoring the event. There isn't a moment of sensory rest as we tensely witness the build to destruction. The images, the event and its observers all have a ferocious violence that is accentuated by the melancholy modesty of the artist's sweet Stardust memories.

Providing a brief respite is "Self-tending," a spare, hypnotic and nervous animation that transitions the front and back galleries. The piece highlights the relationship among contemporary architecture, spectacle and what might be, says Borg, the "next development ... in the field of high-end destinations." A spinning black surface sets the stage for a collection of clear cast-resin forms that stack and unstack in a variety of configurations. An ideal future architecture as one that inhabitants may build and un-build at their discretion? That's one way to fill the void.

"Adventure Non-Fiction: Tracking the Void" is like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. It crystallizes the sensitivity to contemporary horror vacui that runs like an undercurrent throughout the exhibition. (Horror vacui is a fear of empty space that often results in an obsessive need to *fill*.)

The work consists of three video screens: Straight ahead is a street-level tracking shot, again in a swiftly recognizable vernacular that can only be Las Vegas: the people, the buildings, the lights. The footage was filmed on the Strip in 2004, and is already obsolete: some of what it depicts has been razed, some unrecognizably altered by growth. On each flanking screen, looped street-level footage of the New Orleans-esque "Queen of Hearts" motel and casino-cum-homeless city the "Aztec," respectively, fill the screen endlessly.

If you see only one art show this fall, make it this one.

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