

## Hooper's art wanders where it shouldn't: cordoned-off areas of human sexuality, démodé or embarrassing issues of faith and limit experience.

Claire Hooper's *The Blessing*—an immersive 12-screen video installation shown in 2007 at Sketch, London—covers plenty of ground in its 13 minutes. Like the majority of the London-based artist's works, it is rooted in language: specifically, in consonances between the mystical experiences described by Saint Teresa of Avila in the 1550s and a friend's description of a shatteringly bad acid trip. And if the footage itself isn't particularly literal, it similarly hopscotches across cultural divides. Secreted in *The Blessing*'s stately drift, which includes figures both meditating and writhing, starbursts of psychedelic postproduction, and a sound track (by Kenichi Iwasa) that moves from Sensurround pings to a vast sampled chorus of gospel singers, are secondary references to "head" movies by the likes of Dario Argento, David Lynch's *Dune*, early Bruce Nauman videos, and Fra Angelico's protosurrealist fresco *The Mocking of Christ*.

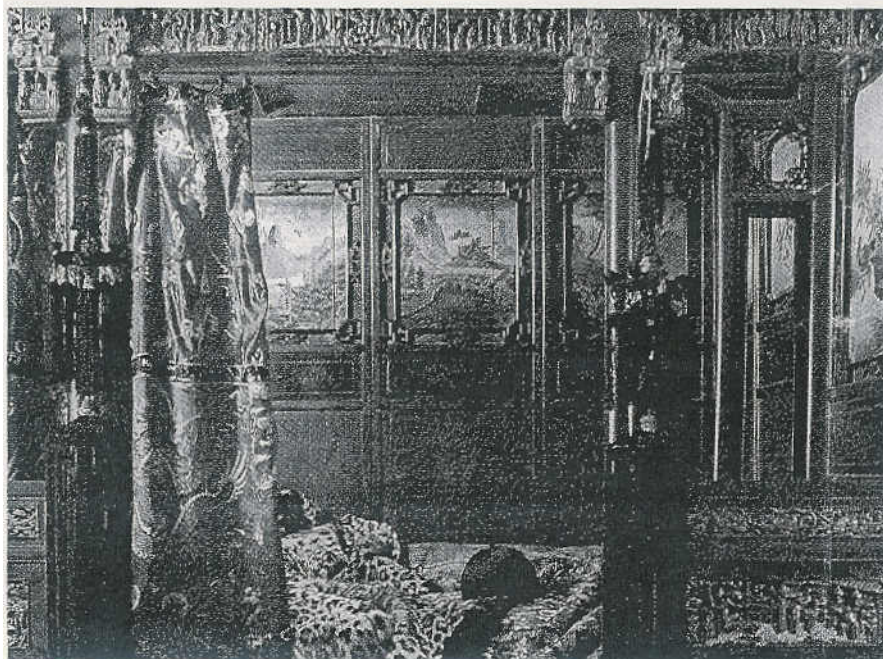
Hooper describes this last work as engendering "a space created by thought itself, a complicated platonic zone," and she is clearly fascinated by the sort of interchange here implied between external and internal terrains. Her 2005 film *Auditorium*, for example—filmed in a spacious lecture theater in Dunkerque, France—proposes an erotics of pedagogical space. A lucid dream of seminude female lecturers and furtive physical contact among the sparse audience, it reflects, says Hooper, "the passive-aggressive, sexual thing of being physically restrained" that underscores the experience of instruction. It is equally a study of the mechanisms of narrative, the environment's understated energies here spurring a story, if a skeletal one.

The phenomenology of narrative, its construction and our response to it, is close to the heart of Hooper's art. Her 2004 book

project *Victim*—which pivotally spurred her to use writing in her own subsequent work—lives in the numerous plotline ellipses of the Basil Dearden-directed 1961 British film of the same name, concerned with male homosexuality. Hooper asked 16 people to fabricate background stories in response to the work's lacunae, but not before she'd "cast" the project by matching each author to the movie character she would have them discuss.

Hooper is drawn to spaces within stories, not least because they allow the artist to find space for herself in a long line of cultural production. What she's also foregrounding, however, is a broken line of antirational thought that accepts doubt, gaps, and psychic uncertainties, binding the medieval mystical tradition to the late-modern drug culture and such auteurs as Alain Robbe-Grillet. She accepts some unlikely inclusions into this grouping: *World of Interiors* (2006), for instance, positions a voice-over description of the narrator's mindscape at often-oblique angles to photographic imagery from the eponymous magazine—one now-retired leading photographer for whom, as Hooper describes it, played subtle but extraordinary games with the reader's impressions of architectural space.

Hooper's real focus may well be the egalitarianism that leads her to such sources. Her art repeatedly wanders where it shouldn't: into cordoned-off areas of human sexuality, into démodé or embarrassing issues of faith and limit experience, into dusty corners of culture. It felt brimful of integrity but unarguably *wrong* when I first saw it. If it feels the same now—and it does, which means we have a problem with decorousness and self-censorship in contemporary art—there's no question that she's doing something right.



LEFT  
WORLD OF INTERIORS, 2006  
DVD, 8 MIN 26 SEC

ABOVE  
AUDITORIUM, 2005  
DVD, 8 MIN

BOTH IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST AND  
HOLLYBUSH GARDENS, LONDON