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In videos, seeing is experiencing; Victor Burgin's 'Little House' is haunting

Victor Burgin: The Little House

CAMBRIDGE - Victor Burgin offers no introductory text to his single-channel video installation "The Little House," in the Sert Gallery at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The visitor walks in bare, ignorant of Burgin's intriguing sources.

The experience is lush and haunting. The video, projected large in a dark room, sweeps through a sparse Modernist house and garden to the accompaniment of a text, read aloud by a woman. The text is part libertine novel, with a lothario attempting to seduce a lady, part mouth-watering passages on interior design. Every now and then, the tour stops, and a young Asian woman appears holding a small book. The piece evokes desire, heaving like an eager bosom against a tightly laced bodice of restraint: Barbara Cartland meets Frank Lloyd Wright.

For decades, Burgin has been a leading light of conceptual art and an avowed feminist. "The Little House" patiently and methodically leads us into territory fraught with the tension between desire and its pale satisfaction. The house is Rudolph Michael Schindler's Kings Road House, built in Hollywood in 1922 for two couples in open marriages; divorce ensued.

The steamy text, Jean-Francois de Bastide's 1758 novel "La Petite Maison," follows a wager: the Marquis de Tremicour bets that a tour of his house will bring the virtuous Melite to his bed. Burgin's version, on a video loop, never reaches that end; he suspends resolution.

The Asian woman holds Mao's Little Red Book. The woman is the video's keystone. She might represent Melite, or the room "a la Chinoise" in the little house, a symbol of Westerners' coveting of the mysterious East. But Burgin's cultural revolution is far gentler than Mao's is. It's a spiral of yearning and resistance through centuries and across continents.

Cate McQuaid