

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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## Art in Review; Victor Burgin

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### 'The Little House'

The veteran English Conceptualist Victor Burgin has more than 35 years of art and writing to his name, so it is dangerous to generalize about his achievement. Still, the video "The Little House," in his 11th gallery show in New York, may be one of his best efforts.

Like two previous pieces, this work translates the photo-text combination for which Mr. Burgin is best known into a video that explores a specific architectural site, while a voiceover travels elsewhere. On screen, the camera trolls through the austere beautiful interior and garden of the Japanese-influenced modern house the architect Rudolph Schindler built for himself, his wife and a second couple in Los Angeles in 1922. Its pavilion-like open plan reflected their open marriages, but it was damp and drafty and fomented divorce.

Meanwhile, a woman's voice takes us to 18th-century France, specifically to an aristocrat's "petite maison" built for trysts, where a seduction is in progress. The text, adapted from an 18th-century book by Jean-Francois de Bastide, is a kind of titillating real estate brochure. It alternates detailed descriptions of interiors rich in color and chinoiserie with the charged conversation of one Marquis de Tremicour and a young woman named Melite, who has wagered that she will not yield to her host's charms.

The serene plainness of the architectural setting before you contrasts well with the opulent one you build in your mind, while the couple's skillful repartee shows a woman easily holding her own.

Mr. Burgin's text-image work has often had a made-by-committee obscurity spiced by slick presentation (a critique of advertising) and gratuitous images of beautiful young women (despite the artist's avowed feminism). Here, the feminist perspective is sharper, the beauty diffuse, the slickness replaced by elegance. The romanticism often glimpsed in Mr. Burgin's art has come to the fore, to improvement on all fronts.