



David Claerbout: *Shadow Piece*, 2005, black-and-white video, 30 minutes; at the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

David Claerbout

MIT List Visual Arts Center

This first U.S. museum presentation of the works of Belgian artist David Claerbout, organized by Christine Van Assche at the Pompidou Center, travels to other museums in Europe, Canada and Australia in addition to the List, at present its only U.S. venue. Here the show consisted of seven large projections all made since 1998, displaying Claerbout's signature features: elaborate production, seamlessly merged moving and still photography, and references to modernist film, photographs and architecture.

Other concerns include the substance of time and photographic truth. Claerbout goes to great lengths to sabotage perceptions of both. *Bordeaux Piece* (2004) is a nearly 14-hour-long, 70-segment video, shown on a wide, cinematic screen, in which three actors repeatedly play out the same dramatic 10-to-12-minute episode. Claerbout shot the scene—a love betrayal loosely based on Godard's 1963 film *Le Mépris* (Contempt) and set in a contemporary country house—over several days at intervals from 5:30 A.M. to 10 P.M., using only natural light. He edited those shots into one composite day.

Despite the charged narrative and the striking house (designed by Rem Koolhaas), Claerbout's real subject, according to gallery text, is changing light. The slow development comes from nature, not dialogue (which is heard via headphones, while recorded sounds of nature are audible in the gallery). Since the piece is synched to coincide with real time, few visitors are likely to see the duskier episodes, and during gallery hours not much changes in the few episodes for which most viewers have time or patience. Still, the piece is subtly mesmerizing. After the narrative loses its initial frisson, one begins to realize how controlling—how like a terrarium for human specimens—is the angular, glass-walled architecture.

Shadow Piece (2005) is even more sly. This 30-minute black-and-white video, projected onto a wall-sized scrim, appears to have been shot from inside an elegant, glass-fronted lobby looking outward, where frustrated passersby try to enter the locked doors. Brilliantly installed at the List just inside the darkened gallery, the piece enfolds the actual exhibition passageway within the projected architecture. Like those puzzled people on the video's sidewalk, one almost expects to enter the empty lobby on the scrim. But only their

shadows, and ours, will ever do so. In a turn that recalls Tati's 1967 film *Playtime*, Claerbout has melded a still photograph of an empty modernist lobby with a staged video of people on the outside. Some peer in, shading their eyes from the glare; others futilely rattle the doors; some just glance curiously toward the space and wander on. Claerbout cleverly dramatizes the nostalgic sense of longing to reenter the past that photography engenders, while sending up modernism's impenetrable, cold and glassy perfectionism.

Other pieces shown here are themselves impenetrable without their backstories. Yet most demand attention, because no matter their ostensible subjects, they tend to make the familiar seem not quite right in some vague, disturbing way.

—Ann Wilson Lloyd