



The final room of Ulla von Brandenburg's exhibition, It has a Golden Red Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon, requires people to climb oversized stairs to get uncomfortably close to the screen. (toni\_hafkenscheid)

## **Ulla von Brandenburg's Power Plant show blurs artistic boundaries**

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It's tempting to think of Ulla von Brandenburg as an interdisciplinary artist. She's known for work that pairs film with installation, textile with dance, and draws heavily on the theme of performance.

But what I like best about her current exhibition at the Power Plant in Toronto, It has a Golden Red Sun and an Elderly Green Moon, is the way she makes the very idea of artistic disciplines seem a bit like splitting hairs. Instead, the stuff of her art is crushed and ground back down to its elements; all sorts of matter make new bonds. The effect is a kind of total art redolent of Wagner's theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but for von Brandenburg it's delivered at an eerie remove.



Eleven of Ulla von Brandenburg's films are on display at the Power Plant, with a parallel exhibition in Montreal. (Toni Hafkenscheid)

The Paris-based German artist, who's been nominated for this year's Prix Marcel Duchamp (worth €35,000 [\$50,000] and a solo exhibition at the Pompidou Centre), works frequently in black-and-white film, usually shot in one take on 8mm, Super 8 or 16mm. Eleven of them are on display in the Toronto exhibition, which runs concurrently with von Brandenburg's similarly named exhibition at Montreal's Darling Foundry (in its title, the sun becomes *Golden Orange*, the moon *Elderly Blue*). Throughout the year, there have been parallel exhibitions in Melbourne, Zurich and Aarhus, Denmark.

Each show features the same new film, whose title is also nearly eponymous with the exhibition, *It Has a Golden Sun and an Elderly Grey Moon*. This isn't just inane repetition meant to confuse everyone; it's part of von Brandenburg's exploration of

ritual and recantation, of meaning, movement and mechanized speech.



The films are projected onto the walls of three interconnected rooms, affording plenty of space to take in von Brandenburg's work. (Toni Hafkenschaid)

It's an exploration that starts in retreat. Wandering through the three interconnected rooms at The Power Plant, where the films are projected onto walls, some through prisms of primary colour, I enjoyed how much space von Brandenburg afforded me.

Hers is a light touch, but an exacting one, and her restraint reinforces the shimmering, otherworldly atmosphere of her films. In *Singspiel* (2009), the camera winds through Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye to land on what looks like an intergenerational family singing to one another at a dinner table. In *Die Strasse* (2013), actors make repetitive gestures behind the scaffolding of an outdoor theatre, then move their

lips to the dubbed sound of von Brandenburg's voice.



The Paris-based German artist erases the distinction between artistic disciplines, crushing and grounding the stuff of her art back down to its elements. (Toni Hafkenschaid)

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But her major exploration comes via dance. The new film, which takes over an entire wall in the final room behind a huge, double-sided staircase, features a cast of five dancers dressed in plain pastels. They inhabit the space in and around a staircase that mirrors the one in situ.

The choreography shifts from purposeful and structured to haphazard and improvised. At times it appears to replace language, facilitating communication between the dancers; at others, it seems merely exploratory or ritualistic. Huge swatches of primary-coloured fabric play a recurring part throughout the 22 minutes of action, shot in one take. At the end, the dancers lift the swatches over their bodies, turning the stage into a palette of bright squares with human feet.



Her newest film features a cast of five dancers dressed in plain pastels. (Toni Hafkenschaid)

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The reference that leaps to mind is the Judson Dance Theater of 1960s New York, the renegade collective that dismantled every nagging convention about what modern dance was or could be. Led by San Francisco-born Yvonne Rainer, the group outlawed technique, virtuosity, theatricality, glamour, spectacle and style, turning to pedestrian choreography performed in non-traditional settings. It's dancers worked by dogma and, like many movements determined to topple a set establishment, they developed their own set of unbending tenets. If you want to perform Rainer's canonical *Trio A*, you need to learn it from one of the few people Rainer has authorized to teach it. It has an almost religious whiff.

It makes sense to me that von Brandenburg would be drawn to the Judson Group's contradictions – its asceticism and style, its



The final room of the exhibition requires people to climb oversized stairs to get uncomfortably close to the screen. (Toni Hafkenschaid)

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inhibition and its rules. The collective was also interested in the erasure of disciplinary distinctions; in fact, it was as influential in visual arts as it was in dance. The very purposeful plotting of banality, the focus on patterning and composing – instead of theatricality and feeling – has its parallel in von Brandenburg’s films, in which voices are disconnected from speech, buildings from people, movement from intention. Everything is flattened and rendered at a distance, even when (in the last room) you’re forced to climb an oversized staircase that brings you uncomfortably close to the screen. Some expanses can’t be crossed; in art, as in life, we often must content ourselves with surfaces.

*It Has a Golden Red Sun and An Elderly Green Moon continues until Sept. 5 at The Power Plant in Toronto.*