



## Don't Look Now The not-so-pleasant dreams of Aida Ruilova by CHRIS CHANG

It begins (and ends) in confusion: the first image involves a man's butt-crack peeking out between shirt and drooping trousers. He stands in a nondescript room; a female companion lurks in the background. As if commenting on the vexing exposure of flesh, she says, "What is that? What is it?" The quandary continues: "That sound. It's like some kind of...reminder. I hear it like it's coming from inside of me." She stands perplexed in front of a full-length mirror. Her words are not making too much sense. She seems to refer to an ambient tone on the soundtrack—a liminal noise that one can imagine emanating from a David Lynch-approved radiator. But from the woman's perspective, the resonance originates from her stomach. Something is clearly amiss.

The man, seen in full, is of the sturdy-yet-disheveled type—just the sort you'd expect to find in a motel noir. He's played by Raymond Pettibon, a visual artist best known for his sturdy-yet-disheveled drawing style. If



you're familiar with Black Flag, the defunct punk rock band, you've seen examples of his work on the album covers. The actress is the unmistakable Karen Black. This not-so-odd couple have come together under the auspices of Aida Ruilova and her seven-minute video, *Meet the Eye*. The duo, thanks to Ruilova, find themselves aesthetically suspended (trapped) within a series of structural concerns the artist has been exploring for the last decade—formal strategies rooted in but not limited to ongoing investigations of rhythm, repetition, and extreme narrative elision.

The majority of her work—

some examples of which clock in at less than a minute—is shaped by an editing style that tends to prioritize sound over image and mood over meaning. (A collection of her shortest pieces features people repeatedly uttering the most meager of exclamations, such as "uh-oh," "um," and "okay.") Material is often cut and recombined according to auditory cues as the visuals fall into a lock-step cadence with the sonic lead. Things mutate further—in a neo-baroque, theme-and-variation sense—when Ruilova alternates between the carbon-copy repetition that can be achieved by step editing alone, and the repetition realized by stringing together multiple takes with their slight fluctuations. When viewed in endless loops, the "originality" of any given act begins to lose definition, as its meaning dissolves amidst its own deviations. Not unlike repeating your name out loud several times.

*Meet the Eye*, which screened June 16 to September 27 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, would be a magnum opus of sorts. It's Ruilova's first project

with demonstrable production value—thanks in part to the use of a Red camera and a soundstage—and the first with a name cast. (The artist's self-proclaimed muse, the French soft-core horror-movie auteur Jean Rollin, appears in her 2006 video *life like*—but truth be told, he doesn't do much more than play dead.) *Meet the Eye* also features an element of actual (albeit quasi-) narrative: the room includes a peephole above the bed's headboard. A recurring shot of a knife carving out the aperture punctuates the proceedings. The action culminates when Black peers through and sees a smoke-filled antechamber. The hidden space contains a creepy bundled object that can only be a body. The sound she speaks of, i.e., the "reminder" of "something" that clearly disturbs her very being, might involve a murder. And the man, who may or may not be a partner in that crime, is surely guilty of something. (Or not.)

The point perhaps is this: no matter how much one reveals about what goes on in this particular room, none of the details disclosed can ever amount to a spoiler. Ruilova's form of storytelling can't be derailed by giving away the ending. Not unlike a nightmare. □