

Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler

TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY

Like much of their quietly elegant, keenly intelligent video work, the two ambitious projects by the artist team of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler recently on view at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery made significant demands on, and richly rewarded, viewers' attention. Clocking in at fifty-four and twenty-four minutes, respectively, the works—*Grand Paris Texas*, 2009, and the new two-screen video installation *Méliès*, 2011—represent the first two installments in a planned trilogy exploring the physical conditions and social character of the cinematic experience, here with particular respect to film's relationship to place and memory and the kinds of psychic traces movies leave in their wake. While the videos no doubt confounded most casual gallery-goers' regular viewing tempo, those with the time and inclination to settle into the pieces' unhurried rhythms would have found much to admire in the way their low-key, detective-story formats were routed through strategically oblique, sweetly melancholy renderings of small-town life.

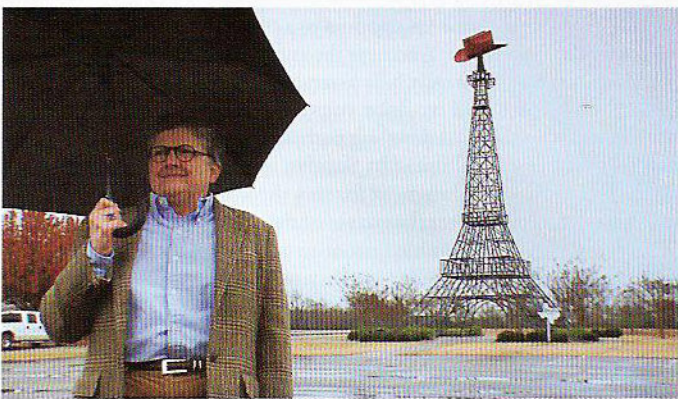
Constructed from extensive interviews intercut with beautifully shot interior and exterior sequences, both films are set in Texas (the artists are based in Austin)—the former in the town for which the elegiac 1984 movie, written by Sam Shepard and directed by Wim Wenders, is named; the latter in and around a west Texas border spot called Sierra Blanca—and both involve searches, of sorts, for things both remembered and forgotten. If the older work, *Grand Paris Texas*, revolves around the eponymous Wenders film (which, not coincidentally, is neither set in nor has much of anything to do with Paris, Texas, itself, but rather treats the town as a kind of placeholder for a generalized sense of desire and loss), it takes as its physical centerpiece a derelict cinema in the center of the town. Long abandoned, the Grand was once a meeting place of considerable style for Paris's several thousand residents, but today it's a crumbling shell, exhaling dust and cobwebs and hosting nothing but a colony of pigeons.

Hubbard and Birchler take their time as they excavate the structure's evocative psychogeographics, alternating behind-the-scenes footage of their crew exploring the cinema and setting up shots with the products of those activities—footage of vacant offices, empty corridors, and disused screening rooms. Throughout it all, residents of the town tell stories that revolve around *Paris, Texas* and the theater—among them,

an elderly man who worked for many years as the Grand's projectionist; a young woman who rented the sole copy in town of Wenders's film with her boyfriend one night, only to find that the end of it had been taped over with a silent 1925 western called *Tumbleweeds*; and a philosophical funeral director named Marcus Roden, who muses on the similarities (“not watching but *causing*” an event) between his job and that of a movie director.

The rich interplay of absence and presence in *Grand Paris Texas*—a cinema that doesn't show movies but stars in one; a film about a film “about” a place whose significance lies in its physical and emotional elusiveness—dovetails neatly with the duo's newer, more speculative work, *Méliès*. Like the *Paris of Paris, Texas*, the site at the heart of *Méliès* is a place marked by incompleteness: an unremarkable butte in the Texas countryside known as “Movie Mountain,” supposedly because of a silent film that was shot there in 1911, possibly by Gaston Méliès, lesser-known brother of the pioneering French director Georges Méliès. (Not that you would necessarily learn that from the cast of characters Hubbard and Birchler lovingly photograph and record as they talk of railways and ranching, of courting sweethearts, and Hollywood dreams that got away.) Comprising two projections that mesmerizingly fall in and out of sync, and accompanied by a beautifully plaintive piano score, *Méliès* begins and concludes with scenes of a soundman operating an enormous boom microphone as he scans the open Texas sky for signs of life. It's an image that nicely suits Hubbard's and Birchler's unique way of attending to people and things: always keeping an eye out for evidence, and patiently listening for signals.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Teresa Hubbard/
Alexander Birchler,
Grand Paris Texas,
2009, still from a color
video, 54 minutes.