

Behind Closed Doors

Linking Art, Tourism, 45 Videos Shot In State Hotels Star In '50,000 Beds'

By ADRIAN BRUNE | Special To The Courant
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With its promise of mirrored ceilings, heart-shaped Jacuzzis and cable TV, the cheesy, roadside motel just outside New Haven caught the eye of Erika Van Natta.

True love set in for the artist after she stopped to pick up a brochure one day: The scantily clad couples lying on the beds and clinking champagne glasses in the tubs screamed film, but not of the pornographic origin. "I began to fantasize about what likely occurred behind the scenes of the actual photo shoot," she said. Weeks later, Van Natta showed up with two vans of equipment, cast and crew, and - despite a minor roadblock when the owner caught wind of her plan - made "By the Hour," a film about shooting a romance hotel brochure. "Ultimately, the piece shows how sexually charged the atmosphere was and how absurd the irony of the flatness of the brochure ended up being, when compared to my artificial reality."

Van Natta's faux brochure shoot, a camera catching a guest repainting a hotel landscape a dozen different times and a housekeeping cart raid are among the 45 videos on display in "50,000 Beds," a collaborative video project executed by 45 artists, shot at 30 Connecticut hotels and, displayed by three of the state's leading institutions: Ridgefield's Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, New Haven's Artspace and Hartford's Real Art Ways.

Conceived and curated by Brooklyn artist Chris Doyle and shot by 45 artists at 30 Connecticut hotels and motels, "50,000 Beds" attempts to convey the isolation, change, absurdity and intimacy that take place in the state's beds for rent. "Hotels have always been strange to me for several reasons," said Doyle, whose own 2004 hotel film "Sheets," featuring restless hotel sheets, permanently shows in the lobby of New York's Hotel on Rivington.

"You walk down the corridor with all the doors closed, not having a clue about what people are doing. There are con-

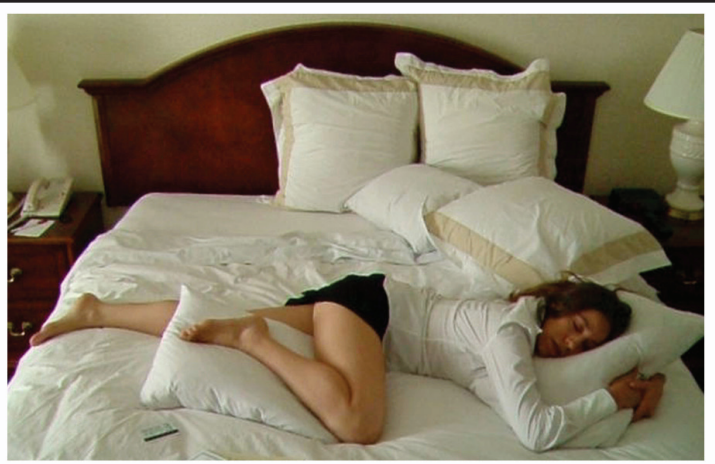


sistently people in your room, changing and rearranging it. And when you return for the night, you're forced to have a new interaction with a space you barely knew previously." The \$200,000 project received a \$90,000 grant from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. "50,000 Beds" marks the first joint exhibition among the three art spaces and serves, according to Real Art Ways executive director Will K. Wilkins, as a push to link art with tourism.

Doyle said he wanted to find "a way for the three venues to address the web of hotels across the entire state" including the B&Bs, luxury, business and roadside inns. He looked for artists who would draw upon their own diverse experiences to execute it - and he most certainly found them. While some of the artists have taken on political themes, such as the Bush administration's surveillance scandal, and others touch on pop culture and movie references - Alfred Hitchcock's movie "Psycho" was a natural idea - many of the video exhibits touch on literary and social topics some may find unrelated to a hotel room.

Take, for example, Megan Michalak and Sarah Sharp's "The Wheel Behind the Wheel," an interpretation of the short story "Good Country People," written by Flannery O'Connor, who once lived in a farmhouse near the centuries-old inn where Doyle assigned the artists to film. The tale of a woman with a prosthetic limb and an itinerant Bible salesman who falls in love with it, to the artists "Good Country People" seemed the perfect choice in the way it provided "some mysterious bit of history that would help us imagine what might have actually taken place (at the inn)," Sharp said. After conducting some initial research, the artists moved into their Victorian wallpaper-patterned suite equipped with a camera, a few handmade props, several costumes, and a rough shot list.

Over the course of the next two days, as Michalak played both characters - incorporating gender-bending as another



role of the movie - Sharp shot the film, and the two completed what she describes as “an ephemeral, funny and maybe disturbing narrative” using the anonymity of a hotel room as a stage for a psychological drama. “It’s also a great example of O’Connor’s dark sense of humor, which we were interested in exploiting,” Sharp said. While many of the films follow a narrative track, several focus on the rooms themselves - their symmetries, their ornamentation and their general weirdness. In “Séance of Maths” Jackie Goss and Andrew Gori tell a hermetic Hansel and Gretel story, with a brother and sister who keep missing each other while they’re looking for their mother among a forest of hotel rooms; videographer Tyler Coburn pays homage to his room by draping plastic over his mirror and all the furnishings in “Hotel, Hotel, Hotel.”

Others take a documentary approach. Chris Wilcha, the executive producer and director of Showtime’s “This American Life,” steals from a cleaning cart with his father, a retired marketing executive, who pilfered soap at his hotel stays in his film, “Cart Raid.” Liz Cohen’s “Head Housekeeper” features a middle-aged woman talking about two successful suicides. And though all of the films shot for “50,000 Beds” required diligence and savvy camera work - all of which will be displayed by Doyle, a Harvard-trained architect, on various flat monitors, projection screens and

beds in the galleries - Van Natta’s short might take top billing in terms of effort and humor. “I wasn’t clear with the owner/manager what we were doing, and he thought we were having a “party” and were going to film it” - in other words, make a porn movie.

“When I tried to explain what we were doing, and that it was an art video project, it probably sounded like a bad coverup, and he insisted repeatedly that he didn’t care if we had sex in the room, so long as our friends waited outside - the more I tried to explain that sex wasn’t involved at all, the more adamant he became saying, ‘I want you to have sex’ and ‘NO! You can have sex in the room, a man and a woman, but just two at a time,’” she said.

Unable to convince him with bribes, Van Natta eventually moved the shoot to another motel with hot tubs and finished. “Being in the middle of it was true immersion. It was a psychedelic night for all.”

50,000 BEDS is showing through Sept. 23 at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor St., Hartford, 860-232-1006 and www.re-artways.org; through Sept. 15 at Artspace, 50 Orange St., New Haven, 203-772-2709 and www.artspacenh.org; and through Sept. 2 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main St., Ridgefield, 203-438-4519 and www.aldrich-art.org.