

## Seeing Double

by Tom Lee, Wed, 02 May 2012



There is a certain human fascination with covert surveillance; a guilty pleasure in observing something that is unaware it is being observed. Filmmaker and artist Leslie Thornton's most famous and lauded work, *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, followed two children struggling to comprehend the abandoned world surrounding them, while an unknown entity monitors their progress.

This secret scrutiny is something that she's revisited in her ongoing *Binocular* series, a selection of which is being shown in Shanghai under the title *Radical Symmetry*. The inspiration sprang from photographs Thornton took two-and-a-half years ago that furtively captured visitors' interactions with displays in the natural history museums of Shanghai and New York. "It was sort of like a gun sight or just a telescopic view from a distance," she says, "a voyeuristic view of what was going on."

Left cold by the lifeless eyes of the taxidermic animals, the Brown University professor decided to refocus on living creatures. In *Binocular*, various wildlife, from parrots to pythons, is shown within two circular peepholes; one displays the original footage, while in the other a segment of the image appears as though reflected through a kaleidoscopic prism, undulating varicolored shapes in tandem with the movement of the original film. Each half of the diptych mirrors, and thus informs, the other.

Thornton's attendance at the Shanghai exhibition opening will mark the fourth trip she has made to the city, a place that her childhood self, growing up in the rural Midwest, saw as part of a "fantasy realm." A region, quite literally in the case of certain school textbooks, that was depicted as topsy-turvy.

"For me there's a particular image, when a teacher in the first year of school is talking about gravity, that will show America on one side, with a person standing on it, and then on the other side, upside down, is China, with a person standing on it upside down."

Illustrations like these led a young Thornton to view China, albeit somewhat confusedly, as mysterious and alluring. "My aspirations were to be where the action was. I had dolls and my dolls lived in New York City; they went on vacations around the world and China was a place they would visit... I even put on plays in school in which I would be dressed as a geisha and thinking that I was dressing up as a Chinese person!" The Middle Kingdom continued to fascinate her well beyond the doll phase, culminating in the sexagenarian's first big cinematographic work, *Adynata* (1983). Influenced by Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism*, the 30-minute film toys with Western conceptions of the East and its people, centering on a mandarin and his wife. Beautiful shots are purposefully undercut with false statements and deceptions about the country and its culture that play into cliché and stereotype.

Like so many of her works, *Adynata* slyly encourages audiences to indulge their curiosity and become complicit in spying on an unknown realm. A similar mechanism is in place in *Radical Symmetry*, co-opting the viewer into sneaking a unique peek into the animal kingdom.

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