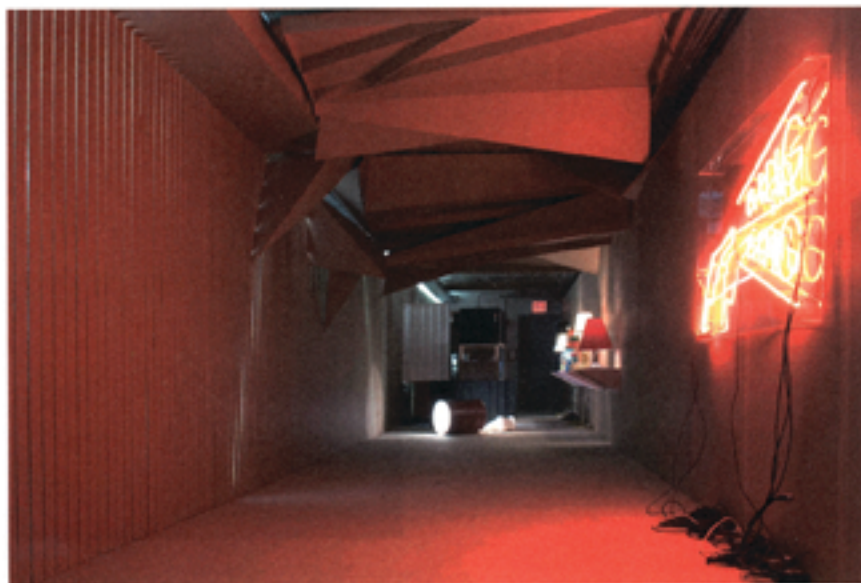


Art Review:

October 2007

CHRISTIAN TOMASZEWSKI: ON CHAPELS, CAVES AND EROTIC MISERY



Since 2004, Christian Tomaszewski has been exploring the perverse filmic universe of David Lynch's 1986 cult *Blue Velvet* through a series of meticulously crafted objects and installations inspired by its precise and suggestive, if somewhat banal, *mise en scène*. Tomaszewski cites Lynch's dystopic excavation of the dark underbelly of wholesome 1950s Americana as an apt representation of the American psyche. Deploying former mentor Ilya Kabakov's theory of the 'total installation', Tomaszewski presents various artefacts – handcrafted replicas of lamps and other key props, scale models of the film's iconic interiors – in theatrical environments that envelope and overwhelm the viewer. The project's enigmatic title, *On Chapels, Caves and Erotic Mystery*, acknowledges an important historic precedent, Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (begun in 1923 and never completed), an accretive, obsessive proto-installation squirreled away in his attic, full of mementos and keepsakes. Tomaszewski's project distinguishes itself through its postmodernist embrace of citation, its attempt to render a particular filmic phenomenology and narrative logic in real space, translating the chronological flow of sound and image into the multisensory simultaneity of an installation.

For his final iteration of this project, Tomaszewski has transformed the SculptureCenter's basement into a windowless maze of rooms, hallways and closed doors, fastidiously fabricated out of corrugated cardboard, an ingenious choice of material: the resulting structure displays an almost palpable and unnerving softness and fragility. Muggy, musty and airless, the subterranean site recreates the overwhelming sense of dread that

permeates *Blue Velvet*. Entry is via a dark vestibule at the foot of the stairs. A text panel declares: 'This film has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your limits.' A play on the standard video warning, it slyly acknowledges the importance of site and viewer in determining the installation's final form and eventual success. A door on the right leads to a room filled with a selection of the aforementioned artefacts: a cluster of prismatic extrusions on the ceiling cites Schwitters's *Merzbau*.

A left-hand door opens on a faithful recreation of the dimly lit hallways of Deep River Apartments, the apartment building where much of *Blue Velvet*'s action unfolds. Somewhat incidental in the film but here the abiding architectural motif, the hallway is a persuasive tool. Neither interior nor exterior, private nor public, the hallway is a transitional nonplace, providing neither the security of home nor the freedom of outside. An architectural metaphor for purgatory, the hallway induces alienation, claustrophobia and a compulsion to exit, as the glowing red sign commands. Each backlit door piques the viewer's curiosity and adds to the air of mystery. One door opens into a narrower white corridor inundated with light from a parallel array of neon overhead; another leads into an adjacent pitch-black space. At first the installation seems to assert a rather simplistic Manichaean opposition, which, true to *Blue Velvet*, blurs on reflection. Initially exhilarating, the blinding white light begins to feel oppressive, like the white picket fence and blue sky that open and close Lynch's film. Initially foreboding, a primal desire, possibly erotic, to know the unknown overwhelms, and finally one fumbles through the darkness. Murtaza Vali