

Time Out Shanghai, *Unmaking Movies*, P54, December 2012




**Art**  
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It's curtains for you Gabriel Lester's 'Melancholia in Arcadia' installation, which has curtains frozen mid-billow, is a meditation on death.

## Unmaking movies

Gabriel Lester's cinematic art has lights and action, but no cameras. **Sam Gaskin** heads to his underground bunker to meet him

In place of a hand rail, a wide green conveyor belt runs alongside the stairs leading down to Dutch artist Gabriel Lester's studio, an underground bunker not far from Jiaotong University. It's just a coincidence that some of Lester's better-known works use a conveyor belt to animate cut-outs of buildings, people and trees, whose shadows are thrown onto the wall and then fade into the distance – the building only installed its belt after Lester had already moved in. Yet following problems with his first Shanghai belt supplier, he says, 'I think we're getting one from the same company.'

The conveyor belt work 'Turn of the Events' is being produced anew for Lester's upcoming solo show at Minsheng Art Museum, but he first made a similar piece in 2009. 'My girlfriend thinks it's eye candy, and I agree, but I think if you can reach such a broad audience with something that everybody could've invented quite easily, then it has a little stroke of brilliance.' The work, whose fast-receding images give the impression of time passing, is reminiscent of early motion picture machines, taking its place, a century or two late, alongside kineoscopes, stroboscopes and zoetropes.

Other pieces Lester is showing at Minsheng Art Museum this month are likewise linked to cinema, hence the exhibition's title, *Roxy*, which refers to silent film impresario Samuel Lionel Rothafel, who established the Roxy Theatre in New York City. The 5,920-seat theatre was known as 'the cathedral of cinema' before it was demolished in 1960.

Lester, 40, grew up in Amsterdam but nonetheless immersed in US cinema. His grandfather was a movie producer and his father worked as an actor in America before he moved to the Netherlands with Lester's Belgian mother. 'But I also grew up with theatre and music and literature,' Lester insists. 'My art has been cornered as cinema, but it's basically about time-based media. How do you structure narrative or artistic compositions with the element of time involved?'

Lester studied experimental film at Sint Lukas, Brussels, and worked as a music video producer before retraining in fine arts at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. 'I went there because I needed the money,' he says. 'I thought they'd have the

equipment, and I didn't have a really good camera or anything.'

After reviewing the projects his peers were working on, he made a determination: 'I'm not going to make video art.' Instead, he developed a practice he describes as 'cinema without the camera'. Lester's work is concerned with how cinematic tropes are used to create suspense and manipulate our emotions. He autopsies film, excising and analysing different organs of what he calls 'the impure media' – its painted sets, choreography, architecture, music and so on.

'How to Act', another of the works showing at Minsheng this month, was created when Lester was still at the Rijksakademie. It's a light and sound installation that creates atmosphere and suspense in the absence of characters and plots.

Having examined music from early cinema, before the arrival of spoken dialogue, Lester says 'you get this blueprint of what harmonies were going to mean in cinema in the way they condition our experience: victory, defeat, love, hate, euphoria, melancholia, desperation, joy, all

these things.' As well as providing cues for how actors should perform, and how we should respond to what they do, Lester says 'How to Act' was also an articulation of 'how to act in the art world.'

The third work Lester is showing, entitled 'Melancholia in Arcadia', is a row of curtains, bright where the light shines through, that's frozen – mid-billow – in front of a closed window. It's an image taken from time-based media, but with the temporal element frustrated.

'I came to that image having made two movies entirely made out of mood shots, which are to movies almost the equivalent of punctuation in written language,' Lester says. 'Whenever evil appears there's a thunder clap, it's a kind of exclamation mark, and in 50 per cent of film noir movies, before the femme fatale enters the scene there will be a shot of a candle, or a little neon sign that flickers.'

'The piece was made in memory of a friend who died, an artist. In Judaism – and I'm Jewish – when somebody dies you open the window so the soul can go out. If you go on YouTube and you search for "ghosts", nine times out of ten it's a curtain moving. The photos of the work that became widely published are optimistic and beautiful, almost elegant to a degree of femininity, but the piece itself is an homage to life and death.'

Lester says 'art is not the thing I like' that he'd sooner go to a concert or a movie than visit an art exhibition. Yet he's unambivalent about the arts' importance. Art teaches us abstraction, and these levels of abstraction are functional when we are in crisis, when somebody dies. But also cheerful things – there is an abstraction with this idea of a life coming out of somebody and you being the father. We need that. Art gives you another level on which to relate to the world.'

Pulling back the curtain on how the arts move us, Lester says, 'is a way of helping people understand to what degree the world around us is composed of these illusions.'

**Roxy** is at Minsheng Art Museum until **Jan 13**. See Listings for details.

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**Art is not the thing I like**”

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