

The Creative Independent



Sue de Beer on discovering new ways to get art made

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New York-based artist Sue de Beer was born in 1973, in Tarrytown, New York. She's known for both her dubious characters and her cinematographic experimentation including colored filters, flickering lenses, and tight crops. To more fully transport the viewer into her worlds, de Beer often screens her films in site-specific environments. In de Beer's films, fiction can rarely be distinguished from fact, and the psyche of our contemporary culture is cross-examined. She's at work on *The White Wolf*, "a low-budget, intellectual horror-thriller that fuses the structure of a classic werewolf story with the Italian Giallo," which she funded, in part, via Kickstarter. It's her sixth major film.

You've often been inspired by the symbolism and fantasy elements largely associated with youth. How have unicorns and other mystical beings found their way from your subconscious into your films?

My first bodies of work as a young artist were graphically violent, and shot in a neutral way. I looked at architectural and wedding photography for a lighting "system"—something representing neutrality or trying to show detail rather than cast a mood. I had these "set ups" that I thought of as being sculptural—they were of people mostly, some spaces. But again, overall pretty violent. Later I started to work with sets and lighting that were more artificial, and with color quite a bit. But still with these moments of violence in them. I was thinking a lot about America, being young, and the edges of feeling and form.

When Shamim Momin asked me to do a project for the [now defunct] Whitney at Altria, it was a public space and she had restrictions on what could be shown there. We agreed that I would try to do something that didn't have images of graphic violence. I liked it as a creative challenge. So I worked with unicorns pretty solidly for that film in order to replace the violence, or as another representation of being young.



Unicorn

The installation of *Black Sun* (2004-5) at the Whitney at Altria was the first installation of yours that I experienced in person. I clearly remember the castle-like setting and the visual and audible elements from the film that were both dreamlike and yet somehow easy to identify with. In this earlier work, to what extent were the characters connected to you and your own experiences?

Oh I don't know, all of it and none of it. The texts for that film are from Dennis Cooper novels, again with the violence taken out of them. I asked Dennis' permission and he said that was okay with him. Most of the excerpts I pulled from his books were written for male characters, but I switched the gender and had the passage coming from a female character. I liked the crossover.

There was a beautiful text that he wrote, "I wish I had the power to make someone love me—maybe a secret word I'd only use when I saw someone special." Dennis wrote this for a gay male character. I did auditions with that text, and had different young women come in and try it out. I did that audition with my friend Titus who had just gone through a bad break-up. Some of those girls just floored him, and me as well. Sometimes it was really uncomfortable hearing this material spoken out loud. I could tell when the girls were speaking that the text represented everyone; Titus, the girls auditioning, Dennis' original character.

While many artists focus on work that avoids gender or sexual references, I see your work as feminine and feminist. Can you speak to this, what I would describe as a particular level of honesty or vulnerability in the work?

As a younger artist, I hated the female part of being a young female artist. I was happier just being a young artist. I hated answering questions that defined my work as coming from a female perspective. I hated having people comment on my appearance in press or in person. My incredibly intelligent students talk about their frustrations with having to "perform gender" or "perform race," and I empathize.

That being said, I don't think about gender when I make work honestly. Unicorns belong to everyone. But I do remember that it was a big moment for me when I sewed those giant stuffed animals as part of the installation for Hans & Grete (2002-3). It took some courage. Now that I am older, I don't really care what anyone thinks of me. I just do what I think will make the best artwork, and let other people decide what it means.



Black Sun installation

You recently worked on a Kickstarter campaign to fund your project *The White Wolf* (2017), a horror film inspired by the aesthetic of the Italian Giallo.

Well, every film I've made is inspired by the Italian Giallo, but they are all unique and from a plot point of view. They really have little to do with the Italian Giallo genre.

The Kickstarter campaign was something I wanted to try. I remember talking with Jongho Lee about Rob Pruitt's eBay store, about how much I liked it and how it reached different people. The audience was people that wouldn't normally be able to collect expensive artwork, sometimes people that didn't follow art. I can't afford to buy expensive artwork, so I enjoyed a place made by an artist where people like me could participate.

A few people that I respect have done Kickstarter campaigns and I thought maybe it was a quiet way to change the power structure for what can be funded, like Bernie Sanders' "30 dollar donations." I think social media has been a powerful force for change in that way. Suddenly groups of people have a sense of how large their collective group is, and how they have shared concerns. I made the Kickstarter, published it, and panicked. It's really public! So if you screw up everyone sees it fail in real time! They keep it up forever so I felt a lot of pressure to make a film I felt proud of. I'm relieved that my Kickstarter has been a success, and I forgot about the part where I could really publicly fail!

Do you think crowdfunding shifts the gallery system?

I've been represented by, I think, eight or nine galleries. Half of the eight galleries that I've shown with have closed. Some of them closed in different economic downturns, or shift of market. In general, I would say that I know galleries have tremendous amounts of overhead. Art fairs are very expensive and the rents in New York are incredible, so it's just the basic overhead of keeping your doors open that's quite something.

I'm fortunate enough to show with a gallery that is very stable and successful, but I do think that with work like mine, which has a ton of up-front costs, that the galleries I've worked with have all generously wanted to jump on board and help me. But it's always been a collaboration, and it's always involved very creative fundraising to get work like mine made.

Kickstarter is structured in such a way that all of the strategies I've used with different institutions, or different galleries, are built into the structure of the site. The thing that I really like about Kickstarter is that everyone can be involved in making the work happen. I mean, I just gave five bucks to the LAND Kickstarter campaign because that's what I had that day.

Jasmine Tsou from JTT Gallery and I were recently talking about the overhead of galleries in the Lower East Side. What it means to have a dynamic program, a vision for the gallery, along with the realistic needs of keeping themselves and the doors open. Some work is a longer-term investment, where you won't see return on a financial investment sometimes for many years. I think that something like the Kickstarter campaign frees galleries up to be visionaries. People don't go into running galleries unless they absolutely love art.



Black Sun still

You recently collaborated with Gucci and VICE on commissioned projects. The end result of your work never feels different from your gallery-based aesthetic. Has it been difficult to convince collaborators and directors the importance of keeping your aesthetic? Or is that what they come to you for?

I've been lucky about with whom I've worked. But also it's hard for me to make anything other than that. I don't think I could. So if someone commercial asks me to do something, they know I'll just be the artist I am. No one has ever asked me to do anything different than that.

I love looking at people's choices like the decisions they make when they get dressed, what they carry in their bag, how they decorate a room. When I was living in Berlin I moved constantly, and stayed in many places that weren't mine. I loved that, living with other people's decorating decisions, and their systems for making coffee. Brands work like that to me. I think brands are fantasizing about who their clients want to be, and they try to make that image for them. It's like a present for their clients, and I love that. That's how I think about people that I shoot. What are they telling me about how they would like me to shoot them?

Where do you see your next project going? Is the goal to get bigger and do a feature?

The White Wolf will represent two or three years of my life by the time I open the exhibition—I'm right in the middle of it, so it's hard for me to see past this moment. One thing I would like, though, would be to go back and re-master my older films, and find a way for them to be more easily accessible and be seen. I'm going to finish *The White Wolf*. Then I really just want to work on that... unlocking my five other films somehow, so everyone can see them. I used copyright protected music—it's trapping my work/how it can be seen. It's a complicated problem that I'm just starting to think about. Sue de Beer recommends: *The Howling*, 1981, *The Hunger*, 1983 (Vampire film with Bowie, Deneuve and Sarandon), *An American Werewolf in London*, 1981, *The Wolf Man*, (with Lon Cheney), 1941, *She-Wolf of London*, 1946