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Marie Jose Burki
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By Jane Harris

For her first New York solo exhibition, Swiss video artist Marie Jose Burki presents three works spanning a four-year period. The most arresting is the installation, *Exposure: Dawn I, II, III* (1997), which features three brothel prostitutes from Brussels and Antwerp, projected life-size onto separate gallery walls. The spectacle is entirely pedestrian and devoid of glamour: bathed in a purple haze of laserdisc light, the caged "subjects" stare blankly out of large storefront windows. To pass the time, they sit and smoke, arranging and rearranging their exposed flesh with affected wanton. Occasionally, one presses up against the glass of her private compartment and beckons a passerby in the dark street below.

Parodying ethnographic and sociological study, Burki presents the women in real-time using the last twenty minutes of some two-hour-long footage. Yet, "real" as Burki's prostitutes may appear to be (the implacable looks, awkward stances and ill-fitting clothing are not likely those of actors), their behavior is nonetheless performative: a well-rehearsed act of seduction and cunning. These women know they're being taped. So what do they reveal? Arguably less of themselves than of us. Indeed, the contingency of "otherness," calculated to raise larger epistemological questions, seems to be the primary thrust of Burki's work.

Les Chiens (1994), for example, takes aim at paradigms of scientific classification, particularly those of nomenclature. A monitor placed on the floor closely frames a small mongrel pup. As with *Exposure: Dawn I, II, III*, the image is unedited and appears nearly life-size (the dog virtually sits at our feet). In the even, precise cadence of a television: wildlife narrator, a man reads a random litany of official dog breeds, alternately speaking in French, Spanish and German.

Juxtaposing the voice-over with the dog's balefully serene gaze and still composure, Burki creates a humorous, unsettling portrait. For while we are confronted with the black-and-white mutt's undeniable visual presence, none of the names enumerated acknowledges what we see. Its existence disavowed, the dog's oblivious, childlike

remove takes on new meaning. It becomes a poignant metaphor for nature's inscrutability.

Unlike the nearly static dog in *Les Chiens*, the delicate finches in *Interieur II, III, IV, V* (1995) seem gripped by mania. Ceaselessly fluttering back and forth between the perches of their individual cages, the four birds attempt to escape their confusion through a compulsive repetition of movements. The amplified sound of wings, high-pitched shrieks, and claws grasping metal adds to the horror. Once again, Burki uses her creatures' behaviors—in this case, their agitated futility—to remind us of our inability to apprehend the "other."

Taken together, Burki's three installations develop a pleasingly ambiguous reciprocity which brings to mind the work of both Janet Biggs and Diana Thater. Her unsentimental depiction of animals—similarly slow-paced and minimal—refuses sympathy, and for that matter analysis, leaving us floundering in unfamiliar terrain.