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Inner Vistas in Jonathan Ehrenberg's "The Outskirts"



Jonathan Ehrenberg, still from "The Outskirts," video, 12 min. 43 sec. All images courtesy the artist/Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.

[Jonathan Ehrenberg's](#) *The Outskirts* conjures a world of mesmerizing, haunting, and deeply disorienting beauty. Currently on view at [Nicelle Beauchene Gallery](#), the artist's latest video envisions a world of visual enchantment and visceral disquiet, of existential ambivalence and psychic uncertainty.

With its opening shot of a shadowed, densely wooded landscape, *The Outskirts* plunges us into a world that is superficially suggestive of yet atmospherically apart from our own. As the emergent strains of Timothy Andres' score penetrate the obscurity, the camera shifts to reveal a lone male figure, his face a pallid, dimly lit mask, gazing through the surrounding tangle of tree branches. This image is succeeded by one of yet another, similarly solitary being, a creature of indeterminate nature whose hollowed-out eyes and disembodied, skull-like head are a compelling conflagration of animation and decay, vitality and death.



Jonathan Ehrenberg, still from "The Outskirts," video, 12 min. 43 sec.

Integrating live actors and puppetry, cinematic lighting techniques and theatrical, two-dimensional settings, Ehrenberg's video work also bears the imprint of his practice as a painter. Characters' masks are sculpted of rich impasto surfaces and punctuated by bulging orbs (eyes) of color, while several interior shots, including a view of subtly individuated pottery, register as variations on the carefully observed still life. Further, in its overtly constructed, hand-worked imagery and macabre yet humane tone, *The Outskirts* recalls both the tactile, animated works of Jan Svankmajer and the evocative, stop-motion narratives of the Brothers Quay. Like those artists, Ehrenberg compels us to relinquish our hold on external "reality" and enter a realm of heightened sensation and visceral experience, a realm in which overt artifice becomes a means of accessing profound depths of feeling. In this way the protagonist's mask, despite the immobility of its features, exudes a poignant expressivity, while the unblinking eyes increasingly, uncannily attest to a vague yet propulsive yearning.

Notably, following the moody obscurity of the opening sequence, we are subsequently cast into a scene of comparative brightness, one whose degree of illumination is both arresting and ambiguous. Here again, we encounter the solitary protagonist, though he is now revealed in full and framed against the backdrop of a distant, cliff-side town. As he looks out upon his environs through a telescope, the camera adopts a similarly telescopic gaze; thus we gain a closer look at the town in question, wherein sun-bleached adobe structures contrast with anonymous multistory towers and simply constructed houses, an architectural juxtaposition that underscores a persistent sense of geographical, spatial dislocation.



Jonathan Ehrenberg, still from "The Outskirts," video, 12 min. 43 sec.

As the protagonist gazes out upon this landscape, he seems to be looking across not only space but also time; here positioned, quite literally, on the "outskirts" of his destination, he appears as a figure cut adrift, an individual who, like the collage-like environment of the town, exists outside of any specific place or period. This physical and temporal ambiguity is further intensified by the appearance in the scene of two additional male figures, each similarly masked, whose clothing suggests, in turn, medieval monkish garb and the unremarkable, rustic attire of the nineteenth-century farmer. Where—indeed *when*—are we?

We are, perhaps, everywhere and nowhere, in an eternal present composed of an uncertain past and an unknown future. Caught up in the protagonist's surreal odyssey, we witness his unfolding journey yet increasingly experience it as our own. As Ehrenberg progressively effaces distinctions between artifice and authenticity, between past and present, we are drawn ever deeper into his vividly imagined world, one whose very inscrutability refracts the uncertain, interwoven forces of inner being and consciousness. Elliptical, quiet, muted yet intense—*The Outskirts* is nothing less than a delicate, incisive probing of the self.