



ZACHARY EPCAR'S SINKING FEELING

Zachary Epcar's 22-minute *Sinking Feeling* (2024) opens aboard a moving train as a handful of commuters sit quietly. Pushing underground, the train begins to slow—we recognize the sound—and everything grows faint. Next, there's an abrupt cut. We are suspended mid-air, gazing at three sculptures: each is a woman, shrouded in grey muslin, reigning from the mansard atop 580 California St., an office block designed by Philip Johnson in San Francisco's gothic Financial District. The artist who fashioned the fiberglass figures, Muriel Castanis, called them the Corporate Goddesses.

This shift in perspective, from straphangers below to the trio of wraiths towering above, beguiles us with its beauty and

extravagance. We notice Epcar's eye for eccentric architectural detail and his brand of mordant social satire, perfected across six earlier, much shorter films of similar mood and style. In each case, he fixates on dark, seductive elements in seemingly bland environments—suburban apartments, carparks—populated with desperate Eric Fischl-like characters. Always, there is an attraction to synthetic surfaces. In *Return to Forms* (2016) it's pleather and formica, in *The Canyon* (2021) a gloved hand holding an Amazon package.

Sinking Feeling is like this too: a pastiche of tinted glass and polished black granite, paired with hums, musical cues, ambient city sounds. The narrative elements are, likewise, dreamy and



ALL IMAGES Zachary Epcar, *Sinking Feeling* (2024), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

fragmented, relayed in breathy voiceover as the commuters describe what's happening. Trapped beneath the Bay, they dissociate into fantasy. "Maybe I'll just start over," one of them says, "start a new life." Others report something vivid, shocking: "I imagine being approached by a man in the darkness of the car, his hands caressing my neck, my face, opening my mouth with his fingers, filling me with his warm breath, inflating me like a balloon."

At MFJ's recent screening with Los Angeles Filmforum, Epcar spoke about influences (naming the Taiwanese director Edward Yang, for example) and described his production process. He shoots on 16mm, which he likes for its practical restrictions. He then edits the footage digitally, letting intuition shape the finished work. The resulting tensions and releases feel natural enough, though any given scene may come across as stark or alienating. You laugh, uneasily, when a woman collapses on a Xerox machine, or a man punches "6:66" into the keypad of a microwave. Capitalism is a Satanic death cult, you think, lol. You might also recall Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995), about a Valley housewife nauseated by the phthalates on her dry-cleaning; or, in a structuralist vein, Ernie Gehr's eerily mundane *Serene Velocity* (1970), which moves through a corridor—it looks like a hospital—gleaming under lurid fluorescent lights.

It's tempting to read *Sinking Feeling* as a descendant of these noirish genre pieces, with Johnson's tower as the "sick building" in question. The film perfectly expresses the feeling that corporate

America is killing us all, with a second, more hopeful suggestion: that some rupture—the derailment of a subway train—could free us from the sedations of the workplace. Hence our protagonists' reveries of flight, or forbidden touch climaxing in a soiled Patagonia puffer. There is a line of critique in this absurd scenario, certainly. But more salient is Epcar's fascination with the ways late capitalism is experienced sensorially. *Sinking Feeling* generates the sense of "bewildering immersion" associated not simply with postmodern architecture, per Fredric Jameson's famous essay, but with a postmodern economy full of overproduced commodities, operated by miserable white-collar professionals. The film seems to substantiate Jameson's idea, stated in *The Political Unconscious*, that "the work of art cannot itself be asked to change the world," but to "develop a keener sense of that process loosely termed reflection or expression."

An investment in the look or feel of tech or finance is not necessarily an endorsement. The perverse pleasures of Epcar's films are indeed that: perverse, perplexing, characterized, in his own words, by an irrational mix of "attachments and points of cathexis or desire" alongside "a kind of repulsion, or pushing away." *Sinking Feeling* provides a space to indulge the allure of sublime luxury. But ultimately its outlook is bleak: a recognition that power, faceless and inscrutable, is enclosing our lives. How lucky and yet unlucky we are.

NICHOLAS GAMSO