





STARE CASES

by Jen Hutton

All images: Oliver Husain, *Stair Cases*, 2015, video in production, still, courtesy artist.

INT.—BEDROOM. 3:02 a.m. to be precise.

I am awake at the computer, working towards a deadline. The headphones clamped over my ears negate the space around me with a shush of pink noise; the laptop's blue glare falsely dazzles my retinas.

A buzz rattles my desk. "Are you awake?" She is always awake, an insomniac. I am usually not, but she always seems to know when I am.

I hesitate before replying, "Yes. O_O."

"Night owl!" she types back, and then, "OvO." I put the phone down.

O_O is a charming little conceit. A joke. Two eyes stare out, as large as dinner plates. It is instructional. "Be wide eyed," I recall her telling me, which meant, move greedily through the world and drink it all up.

When I watch Oliver Husain's moving image work I am O_O. Wide-eyed. I drink it all up. I see through his "eyes", the camera enacting a vision for and of film, and of its own conceits: objects of desire, exotic locations, camp *décor*. But at 3:02 a.m. these scenes are their own kind of dream. His vision is its own kind of seduction, a scopophilia accented with a knowing wink: o_o_

INT. — A DARKENED ROOM.

A projector's square stare illuminates its furthest wall. An image snaps into view: a comely woman sits in a chair and stares languidly towards the camera. She is distant and beautiful; an object.

Over the heads of the audience, I begin to inventory the objects that appear between she and I. In front of her face, onscreen: bits of shredded yellow paper, glitter, feathers. A veil of smoke rises as she drags on a cigarette. I see her through a cheap beaded curtain, crisscrossing the film's vertical roll, or between idiosyncratic trimmings made from fabric, yarn, and grapes that dangle from the ceiling. Hands reach into the frame, holding fans and panes of glass smeared with Vaseline. Even the clapperboard becomes erotic.

In the space in front of the screen, that real space occupied by the projectionist and the audience, five members of the audience wear very tall hats made of bamboo and felt. They appear as precarious scaffolding, Tinker Toy structures, or proto-Calders. The hats cast abstract shadows over the woman and her festooned world.

Moving out further, that space is filled with other things: the non-diegetic melody of a gamelan's chimes, the click of the projector, and the audience's titter as the hats bob in the light.

This is how films play. They prefer their own meta-jokes over suspending anyone's disbelief. We peer through a window to see a world, but what happens when the world looks back on us? The strange fantasies of Husain's work are still inherently a kind of truth—his canny sleights of hand reveal cinema's own tricks.

INT.—A GREY SPACE OF INCONCEIVABLE DEPTH

A velvet curtain in a delicious shade of teal hangs on a freestanding rectangular frame. The camera slowly zooms towards it until the curtain fills the frame of the camera's view—a perfect 16:9 ratio. The camera continues to move closer. When the lens almost touches the curtains they part to reveal another set, exactly like the first. This forward motion continues, each curtain opening to other portals: a book, a sheer dress, a folding fan, a key-hole. It is a continuous, smooth space, worlds upon worlds revealed like Russian dolls, all separate but one and the same. Our passage is yielded by effusive ornamentation: hands wearing elbow-length gloves and baubles, feathers and beads. The camera bores into the center of that infinite space; despite that, *purfling* is decorating confined to an edge. The truth is, a dramatic voiceover tells us, the real action is already happening on the margins: the two queens holding up the screen are carrying it towards the audience, marching it up and over their heads, until it covers them completely.

And then, in the dark, "something, or someone, has touched you." This may or may not be true.

This is the story, this is not the story. Or this is the story about the story, something outside of itself. A "pre-visualization." More vivid and yet less vivid, it is preceded by a story treatment — the pitch.

So the scene is more its anticlimax than its point. Husain calls it a manifesto: its backbone is written in its gaze, the thru-line of the camera's steady stare. Its roving eye explains something that remains unexplained: a map of a queer territory.

INT. — AN INDUSTRIAL SPACE MADE SOFT

Three figures wrapped head to toe in white gauze move about the interior. Their bodies and the objects they hold and maneuver frame other sights and sounds: a man at a Rhodes singing a lonely tune, or a series of small puppets. Our vision is guided towards these demonstrations through multiple rings, Dopplering towards a center as if sight itself had an echo. We remember: from high altitude to across a lake to the deep pull of a cavern. Ancient and new, pulled inside and out.

This is how she found me. Wide-eyed, hands cupped around my sockets. In Husain's work the architectures that frame our desires make our wants more potent. Like a voyeur in a Japanese soft-core film, pressing a wettened finger to a tatami screen, or the artist, bringing his eye to the viewfinder of his camera.

EXT. — CUBBON PARK, BANGALORE. It is midday and cloudy.

This is the perambulatory watch of an old bamboo grove. The bamboo huddle in thick woody clumps and creak eerily, either from a breeze or their own fugitive growth. The camera moves around and among these little stands of bamboo, furtively. The bamboo are scarred with many, many cuts: names enclosed in hearts or initials coupled in this syntax: _+_.

But the camera is engaged, looking for an other.

Framed between stands of bamboo, men pass by or loiter. The camera studies them from across the grove. The men wear jeans, loose shirts, back-packs. They look, they wait to be seen.

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