

Holly Zausner: The Doppelgänger Stretch

By Lilly Wei

Holly Zausner has spent much of the past two decades in Berlin, returning frequently to New York during that time, most recently, to complete her project with cinematographer Mott Hupfel, a film called *Unsettled Matter*. Zausner's entwined subjects are the histories of her chosen mediums—sculpture, photography, and film—and the way artists interact with today's urban spaces. She weaves an account of past and present somewhere between a “dreamscape and reality,” Zausner says.



Still from *UNSEEN*, 2007, super 16mm film, running time: 16:32 minutes.
COURTESY POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK

Early in her career, the artist—who was born in New Jersey, studied at Bard College and then at the New York Studio School—created an odd, handmade figure with floppy, octopus-like arms and legs. The sculpture, which was first fashioned out of Hydrocal, and later rubber and clay, often in bright primary colors, came to serve as a kind of ungainly doppelgänger. Eventually Zausner made it life-size or larger. She animated it by hurling it upward from the roof of her Chelsea studio, using the sky and the city as backdrop. While the sculpture spiraled in space, Zausner photographed it, studying the patterns it sketched while ascending and falling

through the air. She was looking for ideas about movement. “The shapes never repeated themselves,” she says of her dolls’ various trajectories. “I did this for a year, day and night.” Eventually, when the sculptures became too heavy to throw, she carried them outside and started working with them in film.

The result was a series of three films: *The beginning. . .* (2003), *Second Breath* (2005), and *UNSEEN* (2007). Josiah McElheny called it “a fantastically grand, Hollywood-scale film trilogy.” In the films, the artist and her doubles, now split into male and female versions, navigate Berlin’s historically fraught spaces.

There are landmarks, such as Mies van der Rohe’s Neue Nationalgalerie as well as lesser-known, but also culturally significant, places in Berlin. Even in familiar sites, Zausner uncovers secret, seldom-visited areas—among them, the vast roof of Mies’s museum. The films are elegantly surreal, evoking Hollywood sci-fi as well as German silents and the work of Chris Marker. Situated within the quotidian reality of Berlin, Zausner’s movies are skewed by the addition of inexplicable events, such as an exploding glass window or a tiger wandering nonchalantly through the grounds of the Bode Museum in *UNSEEN*, which opens with that word sky-written across the blue



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After Zausner finished the trilogy in 2007, she returned to the studio to construct large-scale photographic collages from thousands of the film's hand-cut stills, changing the color and arranging them into mosaic-like, one-off grids. These works, which offered another, more simultaneous way to view the movie, debuted at Postmasters Gallery in New York in 2012.

Zausner has just completed filming *Unsettled Matter*, which is now in post-production. It will premiere at Loock Galerie in Berlin in February 2015 and at Postmasters after that, with other venues pending. Technically, it is more sophisticated than her previous efforts. As always, "it's a dialogue between art and cinema," she explains, and it specifically refers to Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*. Although shot all over New York, it captures a city eerily empty of people, except for the artist, who has discarded her signature progeny for this production. "No people, no cars, just me walking, sometimes running through the empty city"—through Broadway, Chinatown, Wall Street, Harlem, bars, stores, a shut-down Grand Central Terminal, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and more. This is another instance of the artist piecing together a deserted city "into a new geography," as critic Raphael Rubinstein once described her work. It begins with a mystery—no spoiler alert required—in which the fate of the artist is left uncertain after a stunt—does she survive or has she died?

Zausner's vision is not apocalyptic but ruminative, a poetics of the inconclusive and ephemeral in which the locations are the "meaning, not the backdrop," she says. "It's about searching, not about finding, an existential, feminist mediation."