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ARTslant  
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Emily Wardill's "Gamekeepers without A Game"  
by Franklin Melendez

**EMILY WARDILL**

Altman Siegel Gallery  
49 Geary St., San Francisco, CA 94108  
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*What is life? A frenzy.  
What is life? A fiction,  
A shadow, an illusion,  
And the greatest profit is small;  
For all of life is a dream,  
And dreams, are nothing but dreams.*  
Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Life is A Dream*



London-based Emily Wardill's first US gallery exhibition features her latest film project, *Gamekeepers without Game*, accompanied by a selection of large-scale production stills. The film is based on Pedro Calderon's de la Barca's 17th century morality play, *Life is a Dream*, the tale of a young prince imprisoned by his father because of a dark future foretold. Like a slightly happier Oedipus, the drama pits Cartesian doubt against Jesuit faith, offering a sustained meditation on fate and free will, as well as a critique of the senses (with Plato's parable of the cave hovering in the background). Wardill transposes this philosophically laden classic of the Spanish Baroque onto present day London, which she visualizes via the cold sterility of what Fredric Jameson once would have called "Late Capitalism."

The film tells the tale of Stay, a volatile girl given up for adoption by her parents, who in her seventeenth year is presented with an expected, and largely unasked for, familial reunion. Played out against a stark visual tableau, Wardill's version is far from a melodrama of restoration, instead the action quickly unravels into a myriad of ambiguities before culminating in sudden tragedy. Those familiar with Wardill's previous efforts will recognize her approach to the cinematic as her narrative unfolds in a dense network of references and keen philosophical investigations. This intellectual rigor has made Wardill one of the premier talents in experimental cinema. But even without an immediate awareness of the film's encyclopedic richness, a viewer will likely be lured by her striking visuals (and, of course, this is part of the ruse). The film plays out almost in an autoclave, which isolates the glossy slickness of modern day living (it's almost like Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* re-staged in a high-end Ikea). Throughout the film, objects are allotted monumental weight—perhaps as much as the characters themselves—whether it's a Nintendo Wii, a limited edition pair of Nike's, or a designer teapot. This is offset by the audio—a multi channel audio installation and percussive soundtrack that provides a ghostly depth to these stubbornly flat images. The effect is a jarring and unsettling sensory dissonance, that's particularly effective in an early scene, depicting a chilling moment of seemingly cause-less violence. The action takes place mostly off-scene, and with this stylistic choice Wardill can't help but open up an intriguing conversation with Austrian filmmaker, Michael Haneke. There are echoes of *Funny Games*, but perhaps more accurately 2005's brilliant *Cashe*.

As in Haneke's film, Wardill use a certain clinical detachment and static tableau to explore the insidious structures of bourgeois living--which are complicated by the spectre of the postcolonial in the age of globalization. So Calderon's original tale of destiny and royal responsibility comes to engage pressing contemporary questions of the complicity of class, the structure familial allegiance, bourgeois guilt (to name just a few), all unfolding in a unctuous world of objects. These effect is seductive, banal, engrossing, and ultimately deadly.

- Franklin Melendez

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