

INTO THE BELLY OF THE BEAST



American video artist Sarah Morris' latest film depicts the dark, sordid underside of Los Angeles - revealing a world of naked blondes, venomous PR gurus and oily Hollywood legends.

I am standing in the Beverly Hills home of Robert Evans, the legendary film producer responsible for *The Godfather*, *Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby*, who immortalised himself in his memoir, *The Kid Stays in the Picture*. More specifically, I'm standing in his large, mirrored bathroom. It's 11am and he's being shaved by a beautiful, topless Scandinavian blonde.

Also in the bathroom is the American artist Sarah Morris and her film crew, and this whole scene is being staged especially for her. I should probably be thinking about issues of representation and self-perception, about the perverting force of Hollywood culture upon the egos that operate within its orbit, because this is clearly how Evans, now well into his 70s, sees himself and, more pointedly, wants others to see him. When Evans agreed to appear in Morris' film about LA, he was very specific about the breasts, and even now, as the camera is being positioned, Evans maintains an impressive single-mindedness, growling, "Make sure you get the breasts in." Finding myself caught up in Evans' creative vision, I too focus on Tatiana's breasts, casting all ruminations on representation aside and rapidly formulating strategies for my infiltration of the Hollywood elite.





ART & ARTIFICE: SARAH MORRIS



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"That," Morris says later in an ambivalent tone, "is what a veteran of this place looks like." To me, though, Evans looked great – a little too orange perhaps, but certainly as happy as a pig in shit.

Morris, too, has been formulating strategies for infiltrating Hollywood, though with a different end-game in mind: that of examining it on film. Her film, to be screened as part of a solo show at the White Cube gallery in London this summer, is Morris' fifth, the previous four taking New York, Las Vegas, Washington and Miami as their subjects. Each film is a portrait not of the cities as a whole, but of the environments – physical and psychological – created within them.

Morris shows her films alongside abstract geometric paintings that relate to the city in question and resemble diagrams or structural drawings run riot, obeying only their own logic. Broadly then, the paintings and the films are about power, power structures and how they are manifest in glass, steel and concrete, in the production and circulation of goods and experiences, in the image and accessibility of people and personalities and in the spaces, actual and mental, in which ordinary individuals are left to operate.

The films are each around 20 minutes long and are accompanied by soundtracks composed by British artist Liam Gillick (though the LA film will be silent). They are shot and edited to depict a subject matter that is immense yet at the same time almost impossible to pinpoint, to trap and capture in word or image without falling into cliché. In her 1998 film *Midtown*, shot around Manhattan, Morris films people, buildings, billboards and the random ephemera of the city in a wandering fashion. There is a deliberate obliqueness to her films and paintings and so the viewer has to do some of the work. As Morris says, the film's point is "to see how things are designed and how we feel when we operate in different kinds of spaces. They point to the idea that there is some sort of meaning to be discovered in what is being shown. There's an idea that the viewer can see the unending narratives in which we are all caught up."

Morris speaks of the conspiracies that create these urban environments. Not shape-shifting lizard type conspiracies, but real conspiracies generated by real conjunctions – sometimes planned, sometimes accidental – of global power-bases: corporations and governments, desire and necessity. From this mixture, our world is built. Nowhere are the products of those conspiracies more visible than in America, where hyper-capitalist modernity can flourish unrestrained by history or custom, and nowhere are they more spectacular than in America's prime cities, which are surreal concentrations of power, from the towering magnitude of Manhattan, to the vast impersonal, institutional spaces of Washington, to Miami with its tropical modernism.

LA, however, is different. It is a poor excuse for a city, a conurbation built by estate agents, a constantly sprawling suburbia. Here, the physical structures that knit together Washington, New York or Las Vegas and run parallel to the networks of social power are largely absent. Here in LA the right people are everything, and the important names are not places or buildings but stars, publicists, agents and studio bosses. Brad, Jennifer, CAA, PMK-HBH, Paramount, The Academy. Which is why Morris is asking: "If I tried to distil a place as quickly as possible, if I had to make a skeletal sketch of LA, how would I do it?" And showing me the answer – a diagram of names and their relationships with each other. But, in terms of its export power, its influence, both psychologically and culturally, it blows the other cities out of the water.

The right people, then, are key. So, with faultless reasoning but possibly a

touch of hubris, Morris scheduled her hectic seven day shoot to start a week before the Oscars and culminate with some shooting at the Oscars itself. Morris and her crew, including the experienced director of photography David Daniel, shot Brad on the set of the forthcoming film *Mr and Mrs Smith*, Dennis Hopper riding on his motorbike, Pat Kingsley – one of Hollywood's most powerful agents – at work, a woman getting Botoxed. Come Oscar Sunday, Morris was stationed in a prime position on a balcony directly above the red carpet, filming the stars as they proceeded into the Kodak Theatre. Not everything ran smoothly though.

"There's a certain commercial toxicity about LA," Morris observes, recalling a PR executive who told her, "I could film this particular premiere as long as it didn't look like a premiere and that there were no identifiable movie stars on camera. And I said, 'Why would it be in your interests for me to do that?' and she said, 'You are not in my interests. Your film is not in my interest and you are not going to help me sell any units.' She actually said that, 'You are not going to help me sell any units.' And I thought that's really brilliant. At least she's direct."

The flip side of this toxicity was the openness that Morris encountered among film people of the generation that had their seminal moments in the 1970s, a time that Morris holds as defining for her generation (she is in her mid-30s), "the time of Nixon's resignation, which exposed the idea of objective truth as a complete fallacy. That crumbling of the notion of objectivity, especially as it resulted from Nixon's demise at the hand of his documentation of his own conversations, is fascinating because if you look at the films that were being produced then, like *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View*, then you can see that idea was already abroad. Was Watergate a symptom of this large thing? Yes, I would say it was going to happen somehow, sooner or later."

For Morris, Watergate changed widely held notions of truth, and by extension created the space in which the hyper-reality of cinema could become the force it is, cut free from notions about truth or representation, free to create its own space and universe. That same dynamic led to Hollywood's increasingly paranoid control over its own image and so cast characters from Bob Evans' generation as old mavericks from a looser, more carefree time. To come to LA and capture this on film represents for Morris an intellectual journey to the origin of the impulse to deconstruct and question, an impulse that drives all of her work. Back in Bob Evans' bathroom, the shoot hasn't taken long and is now over. The film crew are packing up. As I walk back through Evans' bedroom, the scene no doubt of many a high-powered Hollywood meeting, I stop by the largest picture in the room. It's an enormous framed black and white photograph of two beautiful girls in Sapphic embrace rolling across a verdant green. Scrawled in the bottom margin is "From Helmut to my dear friend Bob", a tribute to the bringing together of two great minds by a common pleasure. Out through Evans' front door, I walk into the centre of the sun-drenched circular courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard there is a fountain and at its centre, cooled by constant jets of water is a gleaming, golden statue of a proudly erect cockerel. For this moment, Helmut Newton's picture and the statue are perfect objects in appearance and meaning. Because at the centre of all the power structures, the conspiracies, the circulation of capital and commodities, the enrichment of a few and exploitation of the many, is nothing more than a collection of shining cocks and carnal embraces.

SARAH MORRIS IS AT THE WHITE CUBE GALLERY FROM JUNE 3 TO JULY 10.