

# Nicholas and Sheila Pye

CURATOR'S OFFICE

The influence of Bertolt Brecht, the Brothers Grimm, and Eugène Ionesco permeates the substance and style of Nicholas and Sheila Pye's recent video *Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007, presented at Curator's Office with five of the artists' photographs. The work completes a deeply absorbing, richly symbolic trilogy, including the films *The Paper Wall*, 2004, and *A Life of Errors*, 2006, which chronicles a trio of destructive relationships between men and women.



Nicholas and Sheila Pye, *Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007, still from a color video, 11 minutes. Young Woman (Sheila Pye) and Young Man (Nicholas Pye).

Common to the three works are dreary tenement-like sets—with bare wooden floors, peeling floral wallpaper, chipped paint, and scant furniture—which form a backdrop for the artists' wordless interactions, composed of measured gestures and movements. The color throughout is wan and muted, the mood and electronic music portentous. Edward Albee-like identities take the place of proper names: "Brother" and "Sister" in the first film; "Man" and "Woman" in the second; and "Young Man" and "Young Woman" in the last. But the exact nature of these relationships—save the suggested incest in *The Paper Wall*—remains oblique, although scenes with upended furniture and shattered crockery suggest past violence, as do the actors' occasional displaying of bruises and cuts. Also unknown is whether the films are autobiographical. Sheila says they are, though very stylized, calling them allegorical approaches to the relationship; Nicholas disagrees.

*Loudly, Death Unties* expands on the ground laid by the trilogy's first two works. The film is shot in high-definition video rather than the 16-mm format used in the artists' earlier work, and includes, in addition to a third actor, hints at character development and emotion. Most significantly, the Pyes enrich the narrative with the addition of mysticism, based on Celtic mythology, and they introduce outdoor sequences for the first time. (In the first two films, the artists wanted to create a deconstructed realism akin to an opera set, confining all activity to windowless rooms; indeed, the only indications of an outside world are thrift-store paintings of horses and of bucolic landscapes.) Here, the video opens with an outdoor shot of the new actor, a young girl cast as a banshee, the Celtic omen of death. Leaves crunching loudly underfoot, she walks slowly through a forest toward a small, dilapidated one-story house, carrying a violin case and accompanied by a gray, wolflike dog. The girl—an anti-Red Riding Hood—begins to tunnel her way into the structure.

Soon, we see the banshee inside the house, locked in a room adjacent to the Young Man and the Young Woman (played by the artists). She lets out a loud scream that renders the two adults unconscious. The woman awakens first, and peers through a gap in the bedroom door to look at the child, whose inaudible whispers cause the woman to cry. When the man awakens, he makes a futile attempt to silence the child (according to Celtic myth, the banshee's wailing signifies impending death), who now plays on the violin an increasingly frenetic dirgelike tune that sounds like the human voice. The woman begins to float out of the picture, so the man ties her leg to a chair.

*The Paper Wall* and *A Life of Errors* firmly convey that man and woman are doomed, tethered together (as the Pyes literally are in some scenes) forever in an endless cycle of tension and catharsis. But here, with a tender gesture, the man helps the woman—who is suddenly untied, lying prone on the floor—to drift away to her death. Placing his hands under her left leg, he slowly raises her body aloft as the dirge gives way to melodic tinkling sounds sampled from a music box. In this elegantly scripted moment of redemption, the tether, at last, is cut.

—Nord Wennerstrom