



*Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007. HD, 11 min.

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# Love Hurts

Canadians **Nicholas** and **Sheila Pye** expose the painful parts of romance  
by **Bill Clark**

SHE LEADS HIM ACROSS A FLOOR strewn with broken glass, intentionally causing him to cut his feet. He makes her jump rope blindfolded in a circle of fire until she collapses. They wet their underpants and lick each other's eyeballs. Such are the actions performed by Nicholas and Sheila Pye, a married couple from Canada whose practice encompasses film, performance, video installations, and photography, through which they explore what happens when people fall in and out of love.

The Pyes are something of an anomaly in contemporary art. While many artists have married each other, couples who make work together are uncommon. The collaboration between the

unmarried Marina Abramovic and Ulay seems the most likely precedent to the Pyes' approach to art making.

Nicholas and Sheila met as students at the Ontario College of Art & Design, in Toronto, in the late 1990s. "Nicholas was studying photography, and I was pursuing film," says Sheila. "We clicked right away when we met, because our outlook on things was so similar. When we married, in 2001, it felt like embarking on a crazy journey."

Indeed, the past two years have been particularly crazy for the couple, who are now in their early 30s and divide their time between Toronto and Madrid. Exhibitions of their work were held





**ABOVE:** *The Paper Wall*, 2004. Super 16mm, 11 min.

**BELOW:** *The Coronation*, 2008. Three-channel video installation, 12 min. 15 sec.

across Europe, Canada, and the U.S., including one last spring, at Curator's Office in Washington, D.C., that garnered significant attention from the international art press. The past year also saw the artists building on the trio of hypnotic films that form the core of their oeuvre: *The Paper Wall* (2004), *A Life of Errors* (2006), and *Loudly, Death Unties* (2007).

In the first two films, the Pyes appear as a couple whose romance starts with uncontrollable panting lust and ends in a domestic standoff rife with suspicion and resentment. The third film portrays the end of the relationship, with the death of Sheila's character. The Pyes convey frantic or exhausted emotional states without dialogue, letting their controlled gestures and glassy-eyed stares or sideways glances speak volumes. The two wrote, filmed, and edited *The Paper Wall* themselves, even constructing the dilapidated three-room set; close friends assisted in realizing some of the more complex scenarios in the second and third films.

Acting in their own pieces has had advantages and disadvantages. "People try to commodify the 'couple' aspect of our practice, because it's an easy way to approach the work," Nicholas says. "But we used ourselves simply because it was affordable and we couldn't convince others to do what we wanted. Viewers assume that the films are about our personal relationship, but we don't intend our work to be about us."



"The films get a different response in cities where people don't know us," says Sheila. "Rather than reading the films as autobiographical, these viewers tend to read the films on a metaphorical level."

Metaphors provide visual continuity among the three works. For example, an empty birdcage symbolizes the sense of entrapment felt by the man and woman. A fire motif, representing the destructive and regenerative powers of love, also connects the films with one another and with the suite of accompanying photographs, which the Pyes see as extensions of the movies rather than as simple production stills. In one of the most striking photos, *Stasis* (2005), the artists are pictured leaning backward, grasping either end of a thin piece of rope and wearing similar floral-print sundresses. The image suggests the precariousness of relationships in which the partners aren't equals or in which one starts to experience a slippage of identity.

The Pyes' most recent video installation, *The Coronation* (2008), examines the sculptural qualities of film and presents a more open-ended scenario. Consisting of three screens, the work has a physical structure that suggests a medieval altarpiece, but the content deals with contemporary themes of identity and gender. The middle panel shows the Pyes strolling through a golden field of grass, where Sheila then lies on her back. A tree sprouts from her face, and its branches start to burn. On the screens framing this scene, Nicholas enters from the left and Sheila from the right. Their costuming suggests Adam and Eve, and their movement toward the center is so slow as to be almost imperceptible. After disappearing from view, the artists reemerge on the opposite sides from which they started, each wearing the other's costume.

Although the Pyes have merged their personal and professional lives, it is obvious, when talking to them, that they are independent, strong-willed individuals. "We do butt heads a lot," says Nicholas. "Neither of us is the yes-man in the relationship, so that forces us to work through our creative differences. In the end this makes the work stronger." "We do get along best when we're working," says Sheila. "It sometimes feels like our marriage is an art project." ♦