

Janet Cardiff
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by Ken Johnson

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

'The Paradise Institute'

Luhning Augustine
531 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through April 27

Could this be the future of cinema? "The Paradise Institute," by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, is an almost scarily captivating 13-minute multimedia experience. But the artists' mind-boggling interweaving of visual and aural systems of illusion — which won them an award at last year's Venice Biennale — goes way beyond gee-whiz novelty.

In a 16-seat theater, you don headphones and face a miniature model of an old-fashioned movie theater, constructed around a DVD screen. The sound from the headphones creates the illusion of being in a regular theater surrounded by rustling, coughing, talking and laughing people. A woman — your date, it seems — arrives after the movie has begun. She speaks into your left ear to almost embarrassingly intimate effect.

The noirish black-and-white film about a man being held prisoner in a remote hospital is hard to follow; somehow what's happening on screen is mixed up with what seems to be going on around you in the theater. Your date worries that she has left a burner on at home, and on screen you see a house in flames. A menacing man with a thick accent appears in the movie and then sits down behind you and whispers insinuatingly into your ear. After a stunning, surrealistic climax, you leave feeling mystified and exhilarated.

What Ms. Cardiff and Mr. Miller are doing is something more than just purveying fancy special effects. They are using technology not only to create a deeply satisfying new kind of entertainment, but also to explore something of substantial philosophical and psychological interest: the unstable relationship between what seems real and what is.

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