

Michel Auder, “Keeping Busy: An Inaccurate Survey

The pioneering video diarist is reviewed.

Jane Harris

In *Chronicles: Family Diaries* (1971–73), Michel Auder films his wife, Viva Superstar, giving birth to their daughter, Alexandra. The entire event is captured, from the taxi ride to the hospital to the discussion Viva has afterward with the doctor who delivered the child. At one point, the latter inquires how tight Viva wants her vagina to be sewn up, and in what Warhol would later call “the most tiresome voice I’d ever heard,” Viva turns to ask Auder. There is no audible reply. Later in the same video, Auder shoots a garrulous scene inside a London hotel restaurant in which the management refuses to let Viva breast-feed, interspersed with subsequent newspaper headlines about the incident (WARHOL STAR TOLD TO QUIT HOTEL) and tender scenes of Alexandra nursing. Again, throughout the footage, Auder maintains his silence. This sense of presence and absence, intimacy and detachment, defines most of Auder’s pioneering video work (a corpus that reportedly includes thousands of hours of raw footage), and is summed up best by the artist himself: “I have always been a voyeur, but a voyeur with a very poetic sensibility.”

In “Keeping Busy: An Inaccurate Survey,” a three-part exhibition taking place at Zach Feuer Gallery, Newman Popiashvili Gallery and Participant, Inc., this poetic voyeurism unfolds like a diary with no beginning or end. The sheer magnitude of it all is astonishing (hence the title, no doubt), as nothing in his turbulent life is barred: not the breaks with his famous wives (who have included Cindy Sherman in the 1980s), nor his battle with heroin, his participation in orgies and so on. Still, more often than not, such melodrama is subsumed in the quotidian, Auder’s chief subject matter.

Presenting more than 40 works that span the same number of years, this wonderful, heady survey includes two 16mm films: *Keeping Busy* (1969), featuring Viva and Louis Waldon—as themselves lolling around in bed—and *Cleopatra* (1970), an idiosyncratic, sardonic take on the 1963 Hollywood epic starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. In their use of nonlinear narrative and spontaneous action, both films evidence the influence of Warhol and the French New Wave, and can be seen on demand, per the artist’s request, at Participant, Inc.

The rest of the survey consists of video, Auder’s true medium, a technology he embraced almost the moment it became widely available. As early as 1969, he was using a Sony Portapak, the first home-consumer camera on the market. As Jonas Mekas remarked, video has been “a part of his life, eyes, hands” ever since (though Auder claims he’s shooting less and less each year, preferring to work instead from existing footage).

Elliptical, fragmented and often layered, many of the videos—shown on monitors, projected on walls and arranged in installations—represent Auder’s signature themes: the biographical vignettes of friends like Alice Neel, Annie Sprinkle and the Cockettes; the montages of everyday people (a prostitute on Tenth Avenue, a male couple having sex, a man escorting a woman across the street) shot from windows and rooftops; the dreamy, splintered travelogues from places like Morocco and Bolivia; and the seminal works shot off TV (*The Olympic Games Variations*, from 1984, and 1986’s

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The Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling, on view at Zach Feuer, being two particularly good examples). His most recent work, *Narcolepsy*, from this year, encompasses five flat-screen monitors on a wall at Newman Popiashvili. It centers on images of a sleeping woman, as well as scenes and sounds of water (girls playing in a river, a sink of dishes, the plink-plink of rain, dolphin cries), cut up and overlaid with other surrealistic details: a person fitting a life-size doll with fake eyeballs; shots of Santa and snowman tchotchkes; wolves killing a bunny; abstract sparks, all playing across the monitors like a Greek chorus, commenting on the action. Some of the video is old—remixed, as it were, from Auder’s extensive archive. The result is a confluence of past and present, dream and reality, fragment and story that evokes the unreliable structure of memory.

This idea of the remix—employed first by the Surrealists, and later popularized by William S. Burroughs (who literally cut up prose, his own and others, to create new meaning)— becomes in Auder’s hands both metaphor and strategy. Revisiting his past, he rewrites his future, and in a potentially never-ending process of editing, undoes the very concept of the *fait accompli*—perhaps his greatest legacy as an artist. That, and creating some of the most strangely banal, yet lyrical, videos you’re likely to see.