

PORTFOLIO

Putting clutter to rest

Using a camera as her paintbrush, Lynne Sachs has created a place to quietly confront our need for constant clamor.

By HOLLY SELBY
SUN STAFF

When was the last time you heard yourself think? Probably not on the way to work Friday; you were playing the radio and returning a few phone calls. Probably not at dinner last night, either. Remember? You watched CNN while you ate. Probably not the last time you visited a museum: You listened to an audio-guide while gazing at the art.

Lynne Sachs, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker, has created an exhibit with special resonance for people in the era of multi-tasking. Her School 33 video installation, "Horror Vacui: Nature Abhors a Vacuum," makes us ponder why we seek constantly to fill our minds with words, music, clatter, stuff.

Sachs thinks of film as painting. She painted, drew and wrote poetry as a teen-ager in Memphis, Tenn. But it was not until she was a history major at Brown University — and spent a year studying in Paris — that she discovered film as an art form. "When I found out people could use film in the same way as a paint brush, it just blew my mind," says Sachs, who for three years has lived in Catonsville with her partner Mark Street, an associate professor in film at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. "I discovered the idea of being a 'filmmaker,' that it wasn't about a crew and a director and a hierarchy of people."

The artist's work has appeared at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and at the Delaware Museum of Art in Wilmington and has won awards at the New Jersey Film Festival, the Athens (Ohio) Film Festival, and the New York Film Expo.

Now Sachs, who this fall is teaching a video class at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, is working on a documentary, funded in part by the Maryland Humanities Council, about the Catonsville Nine, a pioneering group of protesters against the Vietnam War in 1968 came to be called.

Since 1998, when she began the project, she has been haunted, she says, by the story of Catholic priests Philip and Daniel Berrigan, who with seven other people went into a Catonsville draft board office, removed records and burned them in front of a crowd of reporters and onlookers. They were convicted and sentenced to prison.

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GENE SWEENEY JR. / SUN STAFF

Filmmaker: Behind Lynne Sachs, painter with a camera, is her School 33 installation.

"I wondered about my own restlessness. As an artist you have this compulsion to create all the time. And I wondered about being able to live with my own thoughts. I heard the words and I looked at this work I had been collecting and I realized this is something that I had been thinking about for almost a decade."

Sachs has created a deceptively simple installation at School 33. Step behind a heavy black curtain and into a small, dimly lighted bedroom. At first glance, the installation seems to consist only of a bedroom and three ever-changing videos. Stay awhile. You will discover that a great deal is happening, some of it inside your own mind.

The walls and ceiling are white; the floor, gray. A four-poster bed sits in front of a window. The bed's white sheets and coverlet are turned down — ready for someone to retire for the night. Two chairs painted ghostly gray line the wall.

As you soak up your surroundings with its soft lighting, constantly moving images and shadows that flicker against the sparse furnishings — your mind wanders. On-screen images of ordinary household objects seem weirdly evocative. A duster complete with a bushy top of feathers begins to resemble a palm tree. A siren can be heard. Is that part of the instal-

telephone, reading a newspaper, washing a window. Peer through this "window" to a point beyond her and you see an image of tree branches dancing in the breezes of a sunny summer day.

Sachs plays the role of producer, camera operator and actor. She filmed herself while watching her image on a monitor, choreographing her movements in reaction to the play of light and shadow and line. "I could watch myself as I did it so, just like when you are painting, you can change the paint or the brushstrokes, I was moving my body for graphic effect," she says. "It is going back to still lifes. That is how I set it up."

There also is an image above the real bed: that of a large, white bed. On one pillow, a crimson azalea flickers like a fragment of a dream. This image, the artist says, is "all about the lushness of the flowers, desire, and the empty pillow next to you."

At the foot of the real bed, a small television sits atop a table. The black-and-white scenes on its screen have the eerie familiar/frightening qualities of film noir. With her camera, Sachs allows you to glimpse a lamp and its shadow, the edge of a telephone, the silhouette of a person reading a newspaper. Light and shadow change the arrangements of ordinary objects into painterly compo-

things," says Sachs. "At other times they are really about textures and light."

No sounds of silence

Sound plays a role, too. As the images flicker, you hear crickets chirping, rain falling, cheerful voices, a pop song — noises that can be heard on a Baltimore summer evening. Sachs gives each sound equal weight. "It is as though the thunder has the same value as a pop song and as a child crying. It is more about the play between the sounds than the sounds themselves."

Percussive sounds, created by Baltimore composer and musician Tom Goldstein, are woven into the sound track. Goldstein watched the window video several times, adding sounds, one by one, that correspond to particular gestures. Sachs says, "The piece has several layers of sound and yet it is really spare, which I really wanted. That was the challenge: To find real world sounds and sounds that are musical that work."

But the magic of the installation occurs in the moments between these sounds. "The sounds in your head happen when there is no sound," the artist says. "I would love it if someone sat down for awhile to think about the in-

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When not working on the documentary, Sachs shoots other images incessantly, saving them, sometimes for years, until they begin to form patterns in her mind. "The idea for this installation didn't evolve at once," she says. "Part of being an experimental filmmaker is that you shoot all the time. It's like a painting: You don't know where you are going."

A meaningful phrase

She heard the term "horror vacui" for the first time about a year ago. "It means fear of emptiness, or a compulsion to fill," she says. The notion struck a chord.



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As you soak up your surroundings with its soft lighting, constantly moving images and shadows that flicker against the sparse furnishings — your mind wanders. On-screen images of ordinary household objects seem weirdly evocative. A duster complete with a bushy top of feathers begins to resemble a palm tree. A siren can be heard. Is that part of the installation, or the muffled sounds of real Baltimore?

Just what is real?

Sachs plays with this question: real or unreal? You are inside the white bedroom, shut away from the "real" world, yet everything here — bed, chairs, television set — is entirely familiar one minute and peculiar the next. You can look out the window, but it is really a video screen.

Through the window, an image appears of the artist performing mundane household activities: sweeping the floor, talking on the

telephone, reading a newspaper, washing a window. Peer through this "window" to a point beyond her and you see an image of tree branches dancing in the breezes of a sunny summer day.

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The longer you stand inside the installation, the more you see, or think you see. Stare at the sheets of either of the beds — the one you can touch or the image of the bed on the wall — and you begin to notice how the light plays on the wrinkles in the sheets, or how shadows seem to form shapes on the pillow. A dialogue occurs between images. You occasionally see the artist reading a newspaper in the window as the shadow of a person reading a newspaper appears on the smaller television screen. "At times, these images are about specific

things," says Sachs. "At other times they are really about textures and light."

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But the magic of the installation occurs in the moments between these sounds. "The sounds in your head happen when there is no sound," the artist says. "I would love it if someone sat down for awhile to think about the installation. I would love it if someone would lie down on the bed and just think."

What would happen if you put down your newspaper right now and listened? You hear the rustle of paper, the clink of a coffee mug being placed on the kitchen table, a siren in the distance, the happy shrieks of a child next door, the rush of a shower running upstairs, the thump of a dog's tail on the floor, the hum of a refrigerator, your breath.

"Horror Vacui" is on display at School 33, 1427 Light St. in Federal Hill, through Oct. 6. Call 410-396-4641 for hours. *s*