

MODERN PAINTERS

DECEMBER 2004 / JANUARY 2005

Annika Larsson

Andrea Rosen

7 SEPTEMBER – 16 OCTOBER

New Gravity (2003), one of two new videos by Swedish video artist Annika Larsson on show here, reframes the adolescent anthem that it is better to die young than to grow old. It's a spellbinding 29-minute trip inside an excruciating club scene peopled exclusively by nerdy boys. Larsson focuses her signature tight shots and close-ups on their oily faces, clumsily chosen glasses and ill-fitting clothes as they stiffly try to dance to infectious electronica produced by Larsson's collaborator, the DJ Tobias Bernstrup – who croons on stage in glittering Glam drag. The geeks fix their four-eyed gazes on Bernstrup as they march or sway awkwardly in angst and isolation. They look prematurely middle-aged, and they know it.

As Larsson pityingly makes clear, even if these pasty, puffy boys wanted (or wanted to be) Bernstrup, with his slim ankles twisting in stiletto heels and his glistening wet red lips, they wouldn't have a chance.



Annika Larsson *New Gravity*, 2003, (detail) still from DVD
©ANNIKA LARSSON, COURTESY ANDREA ROSEN

Then, out of the crowd, one of the spotty, hairy-legged and maladroit kids is privy to a vision. He sees a computer-generated older man. The man guides him to suicide and, as the boy hangs himself, his dangling feet are transformed via computer animation. While he might not be beautiful like Bernstrup, his new animated body is a smoother, more vibrant version of himself. In that moment, the kid achieves the only form of transformation seemingly available to him: he burns out instead of fading away.

Experienced in isolation, *New Gravity* is compelling but not persuasive, since most adults know that beauty does not necessarily equal happiness and that some dorks grow up to be software millionaires. But in the context of Larsson's older work such as *Dog*, *Polisi* (both 2001) and *40-15* (1999), where societies of sadistic men in fitted suits or tennis whites bully other men into states of automaton-like conformity, *New Gravity* makes more sense. In Larsson's videos, manhood (her characters are always men) spells humiliation, hypocrisy and an adherence to hierarchies based on surface instead of substance.

Superficiality also reigns supreme in *Hockey* (2004), *New Gravity*'s companion video. Here, two teams pursue their goals in the Stockholm Globe Arena before 13,000 empty seats. As in her earlier videos, Larsson focuses on the equipment and accoutrements of the players. But the game's rituals are shadowed by the presence of a hierarchy enforced by impending violence. More music by Bernstrup mixes with the synthetic cracks and whooshes of a video hockey game as the players skate around the ice without accomplishing anything. Here, as in *New Gravity*, adolescent machismo is confirmed. Whoever looks the best wins the game, but it won't be you. Escape while you can. AFH