

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

## ARTFORUM

### *Eija-Liisa Ahtila* *Marian Goodman Gallery | New York*

By Jeffrey Kastner (February 2012)



Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *The Annunciation*,  
2010, still from a three-channel video installation, 33 minutes.

At one point near the beginning of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's beautifully measured, characteristically serious-minded video *The Annunciation*, 2010, a narrating voice-over wonders aloud: "Can something already familiar fulfill the criteria for a miracle? Can one be shaken with surprise by something one knows through and through?" Such questions—spoken over images of a wintry landscape populated by trees and birds and, for one hallucinatory moment, by a strangely familiar bearded gentleman in a red-and-white suit—obviously gesture toward the specific Marian mystery to which the centerpiece of the Finnish artist's most recent show was addressed. But they also articulate an organizing principle of the exhibition as a whole and of Ahtila's practice in general: her insistence on the presence of the miraculous in the everyday and of a kernel of the everyday in even the most marvelous of phenomena.

The basic narrative shape of *The Annunciation* tracks the rehearsals for, and eventual staging of, a modest all-female amateur theatrical production dramatizing the story of the visitation of the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel. The film might seem to carry a whiff of the too-neatly diagrammatic in its juxtaposition of the sacred and secular, but Ahtila manages to stage her dialectic with enough casual ease and engaging quirkiness to prevent it from feeling didactic. And, as with so much of her work, she also elaborates—and deepens—her material with an array of formal and conceptual strategies that trouble the distinctions between fact and fiction.

These begin with the video's mode of display: a three-channel HD projection shown on a trinity of screens that echo the multiple panels of classically painted renditions of the Christian story, but that are here set at angles that make it virtually impossible to take them (and thus the story) in simultaneously. Cast almost entirely with nonprofessional actors (the notable exception being Kati Outinen, familiar to viewers for her work in the films of Aki Kaurismäki; here she plays the

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director, a sort of stand-in for the artist), the video follows the women's preparations for their pageant in a relatively straightforward documentary style. Conversations between the director and the half-dozen women of her cast regarding stage direction and posture are interspersed with moments of easy camaraderie—in one particularly charming sequence, the woman cast as Gabriel flounders aloft as she struggles to master the harness that will bring her “flying” to the feet of the serene-faced, dreadlocked Mary, much to the amusement of the rest of the actors and crew.

For all the low-key appeal of the video's behind-the-scenes naturalism, however, it is a moment of cinematic sleight of hand that steals the show. When the time comes for the performance, *The Annunciation's* realism becomes magical as Gabriel—suspended over an indoor bed of tulips—comes floating toward a window that separates her from Mary and then inexplicably passes right through it before touching down beside the Virgin to deliver her extraordinary news. Like the Santa figure in the prologue, this simple bit of F/X, coming as it does so anomalously within the larger matter-of-fact flow of the video, has an unexpectedly oversized impact, instantiating Ahtila's notion of the possibility for surprise and enchantment in close observation and careful attention, qualities that for her flow literally through the filmmaker's lens.

This investment in the revelatory power of cinema is similarly vivid in the show's other projection, *Horizontal*, 2011, which tips a colossal spruce on its side and breaks it up into six separate images. Like *The Annunciation*, *Horizontal* was in part inspired, Ahtila has said, by the writings of Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) and his theory of *Umwelt*, or the “surrounding world”—the idea that existence is finally made up not of one great objective reality, but rather countless organism-specific spatiotemporal subjectivities. Set up in the intervening galleries by a series of eight multipart drawing suites— the variously subtitled *Anthropomorphic Exercises (On Film)*, 2011—that playfully treat a fir tree to a sequence of fantasy screen tests, the gigantic, implacable, breeze-tossed subject at the center of *Horizontal* is another body that has passed within range of the artist's transformative attention: another miracle hiding in plain sight, waiting only to be announced.