

Watching Alix Pearlstein's videos feels a bit like having to hold someone's hand during a field trip at summer camp. You're both hyperaware of your own body and repulsed by the sticky hand of your neighbour; at some point you can't quite tell where your malaise ends and the other person's grossness begins. This is particularly true for *Talent* (2009), one of the pieces in the artist's new two-work show at On Stellar Rays.

Using a cast of many of the same character actors she has solicited in the past to perform in her works, Pearlstein has orchestrated a set of ritualistic scenarios based on actors' warm-ups. *Talent* takes place in several 'movements' based loosely on what look like acting class icebreakers or audition tropes. The first scene sees the assembled participants lined up in front of a mirror, passing the limp body of a compatriot from one set of arms to the next; at a certain point, someone in the chain walks away and the rest follow, leaving one man holding the collapsed blonde. This gesture of abandonment sets the tone for a pervasive low-level tension among the actors, who seem by turns impassive and edgily competitive as they perform for the camera with strained grimaces and contorting postures. After one of the actors throws himself across the room in front of the group, it is unclear whether the sarcasm in the subsequent applause has been assigned or is naturally assumed.

The obviousness of the shooting — much of it taking place in front of a mirror that partially reflects the camera crew, with Pearlstein herself occasionally seen walking slowly across the studio — allows us to factor in acting as message in addition to medium, and points us towards a questioning of sincerity. In *Finale* (2009), the camera remains in a fixed location, turning around

and around to get a full picture of the studio. The visuals are more careening and less rigid, focusing in and out on the faces of the members of the same group, who are now travelling freely instead of executing movements as a group, and the lack of structure makes it more difficult to grasp the deliberate compositional hinges that let the doors in these actors' brains open and close to our own.

It is the conflation of what might be acted with what might actually be felt by the subjects, in combination with the mildly repugnant physical details of many of these slightly ageing thespians (the fraying jean shorts of one small woman, the sagging craggy face of another), that leaves us caught in the space between our own ego and that of the actors, with a heightened awareness of our own bodies as locales of mortality and transparent emotion. It is at once an uncomfortable and scarily riveting place to be. *T.J. Carlin*

Alix Pearlstein

Talent

On Stellar Rays, New York
11 April – 23 May



Talent, 2009 (video still). Courtesy On Stellar Rays, New York