

VHS The Exhibition

Considering VHS and home video within the tradition of art inserts a “lowbrow” format into a “highbrow” context. Artists experimented with video since the release of the first consumer-level video equipment in the 1960s, but the affordability and standardization of the home video system in the 1980s truly made video accessible to the masses (prior to this, cameras were heavy and expensive, and professional editing facilities were a necessity).

The VHS tape was merely one element in a now-defunct system that greatly altered how individuals related to television and commercial media, encouraging a new participatory and personalized relationship to the technology. Now that the clunky components of the analog home system have been made obsolete by digital camera/computer hybrids, there is a growing nostalgia for VHS that is both symbolic and formalist.

Artists relate to VHS as an historic artifact and as a symbol of the distribution and exhibition of art, while also exploiting its unique properties as a medium. Grouped together, the works in *VHS The Exhibition* make use of VHS and home video to provoke familiar definitions of art and art making. The shared subject of these works is domesticity and the everyday, emphasizing the personal and mundane. Counter to the view of art as monumental, ephemerality and impermanence is also a theme. Each of the works somehow evokes mortality, if only by capturing discrete moments visibly receding into the past.

Matching the layout of Franklin Street Works’ galleries, the exhibition is roughly organized in two sections. Upstairs, the focus is on the larger culture of analog home video. Three staged domestic scenes are organized around aspects of this history, though they are unified in presenting the at-home individual’s interaction with, or intervention of, television. But VHS is more than a vintage object or an alternative distribution strategy. As a symbol it is also incredibly psychologically charged, imprinted with the personal and cultural associations of the volatile era that gave rise to it. Loosely inspired by the interior design of 80s-era horror and slasher films, each scene also incorporates frightening details that speak to a view of threatened institutions of self, family, and nation from this period.

Exhibitionism, and the need to have a public audience, is also an essential connection between these works and the culture of VHS. Even the most personal of works here is designed for public consumption. Downstairs, a more formal presentation of monitors on pedestals and projections reifies some of the institutional norms of art display, making a comparison between domestic and national institutions and art institutions. The obsolescence of VHS throws into relief the dependency of art on some institutional framework for exhibition and interpretation. Without a means to display the content on VHS tapes, they are reduced to functionless things, and their meaning is lost. The coffin-like VHS tape, dressed in funereal black, symbolizes the vulnerability of art once it is removed from a circulatory system of creation and display, for while the plastic tape casing will probably outlive all of us, the images captured on the fragile tape inside will decay, along with the memories that will be lost with us.