Imitation of life: even without knowing the source of this exquisitely painful phrase, used as the title by Fabrice Bigot and Jane Burton for their latest video installation, you can't help but hear its resonant, mordant pessimism. Originally the name of a pot-boiler novel from the early 1930s, it was quickly adapted to film in 1934 for Universal studios. But the celebrated version, which eclipses the earlier one, is Douglas Sirk's 1959 masterly, sumptuous melodrama in which Lana Turner plays a widowed and ruthlessly ambitious Broadway actress sacrificing her relationship with her teenage daughter for stage success and luxury. On its own, this plot-line would have made a conventional moral tale; but the story is slyly undercut to cynical pitch by a counterpoint narrative of the actress's also widowed and impoverished black house-keeper, whose daughter—light-skinned, presumably due to white paternity—cruelly and racially rejects her mother, intending to "pass" as white. It all ends badly.

Of course, we don't need this plot synopsis to get into Bigot and Burton's video; but nonetheless we are led into it through the title's associative suggestions. Theirs evidently isn't a commentary on Sirk's movie—and has no obligation to be so—even if there are numerous ghostly glimpses of that movie which loom and fade (intentionally or not) throughout their video like hypnagogic visitations. In fact, there are many movies that flicker across Bigot and Burton's screen with the similar effect of vagrant memories or, alternately, as spirits being conjured by a morbid poetry: from Hitchcock's The Birds to Alex Proyas's The Crow, from Maya Deren's Meshes of the Afternoon to Hideo Nakata's Ringu, from Carl Dreyer's Vampyr to Henri-Georges Clouzot's Les diaboliques. But these are phantasms more than references. This is a haunted screen, possessed by these movies instead of quoting from them. Its sullen, brooding atmosphere is trance-like and mediumistic; and its protagonist is a dead soul, abandoned but unable to leave the scene of whatever crime of passion—committed by or against her—has directed her there. Is she lingering in purgatory? Is she kept as bait for some predatory lover? Or, is she anticipating a visit from her own prey, and readying the spider's web? Is this femme fatale killing time or is she killed by it?

If there is a trap here (whether as a siren's lure or as an inhuman prison) then it may be not just depicted in the desolate and seemingly derelict house that the figure and her shadowy bird companions move through, but in the gallery itself. Almost anachronistically, Bigot and Burton allude to the shadow and flicker and maculae of analogue cinema projection, as if it's a projection from another time—or, better, from the non-time that ghosts must endure, as if it's the medium that entombs and captivates ghosts. Enter the gallery and you see the moving image of an empty room as blotchy in its depiction as in its decayed décor. Nothing ever happens here: this is true, eternal, oblivion. But the movie is actually what happens on the other side of this screen, its obverse or underside. And you must cross a threshold to see it animated, that's to say, in order to see it come to life.

What kind of life, then, is it that "comes to", that happens, only on the other side? This "imitation of life" is not an illusion of life or a half-life, not a dreary or diminished life. It is an after-life. Not the domain of zombies or the "living dead" but of the "undead": unresurrected, unfinished, unjudged, unrequited; and it doesn't end badly, for it's the story of those whose passions have no limit or end.

Edward Colless

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Fabrice Bigot and Jane Burton