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Marie Jose Burki at Lehmann Maupin
BY TIM GRIFFIN

Swiss artist Marie José Burki's debut solo show in America opened with a seductively humorous work, *Les Chiens* (1994). Placed on the floor by the gallery's entrance was a monitor featuring the life-size image of a sitting dog. Off-camera, a narrator announces the names of a variety of canine breeds, speaking in French with the meticulous and distanced clarity of a pronunciation instructor in a foreign-language class: "le balkanski Gonic, le collie rouge, le deutscher wachtelhund," and so on. All the while, the dog sits with the patient, sometimes quizzical look of a polite, cultured pet. It becomes nearly impossible not to anthropomorphize the poker face of this creature, which betrays no understanding of the relevance of these words to its being. That deadpan stare effectively undermines the correspondence between language and objects that we ordinarily take for granted.

Burki regularly inspires such self-consciousness about one's perception and construction of reality, as in her *Exposure: Dawn* (1997), which served here as the centerpiece. Three roughly 20-minute video sequences were projected simultaneously on separate walls, each focusing on a woman in a single room. One wears an extremely tight dress, places her hands on her hips and looks around uncomfortably, as if alone at a party and waiting for her companion. Another, scantily clad and wearing glasses, occasionally glances at a mirror to see if she's presentable, or looks straight ahead with the perky, impersonal smile of a receptionist. The final woman is slightly older than the other two; she smokes a cigarette, seeming a little bored as she stands before us or sits with one leg over the armrest of her chair.

Only after watching the loops for a time was it clear that while these are indeed performers, they are by no means Burki's actresses. Rather, they are storefront prostitutes, a fact brought home when reflections of car headlights make us aware that panes of glass separate us from the women. This realization blurs the line between performance and person, since the ordinary actions that we see might actually have been selected from a repertory of poses and used as an appeal to passersby. At the same time, the viewer is placed in the role of a pedestrian touring a red-light district in search of affection, leading inevitably to thoughts of the poses that one normally adopts, whether on the street or in a gallery.

A third room contained Burki's *Intérieurs* (1995), four separate projections which show a small bird hopping perpetually and mindlessly from one perch to another. While the projections were effective on their own, their pairing here with *Exposure: Dawn* suggested a clichéd analogy of trapped birds and exploited women. A more generous interpretation might be that "animals" or not, we are all caught in a cage of one sort or another.