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We've been framed

Art films by Jenny Perlin contemplate post-9/11 America and our culture of hyper-consumerism.

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We go to the movies to escape.

But watching films by Jenny Perlin keeps us insistently in the present. She makes the viewer grapple with imperfections -- the fallibility of people, the tricks played by memory, the cruel dichotomies faced by a consumer culture at war. Even the medium of movie projection is called to account.

Three new film and video works by Perlin, and a never-before-seen installation, are collected in the exhibit "Possible Models" on view through next Friday at the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University.

The show was organized by Katie Geha, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Ulrich. It is the first retrospective exhibit for the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Perlin, whose video installations have appeared at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and in galleries in New York, London, Chicago, Berlin, Amsterdam and elsewhere.

"I feel like the work is very conceptual, but also very visceral," Geha said. "It is definitely avant-garde."

Visitors to the show are met by Perlin's film "Washing," made in 2002. In grainy gray tones it depicts someone washing a window overlooking the site of the World Trade Center bombings.

The film runs as a continuous loop on a noisy 16-millimeter projector. (Geha purchased it on eBay especially for this show.)

"As it goes through the loop, the film actually gets dirtier and dirtier," Geha explained. So the physical properties of the film itself become part of the allegory. "As we're trying to clean our consciousness of what happened (on Sept. 11), it is actually getting dirtier and dirtier."

Perlin's film "Possible Models" (2004) also explores the strange realities of the post-9/11 world. It uses stop-animation to follow a handwritten narrative about a man arrested in a plot to blow up a shopping mall. The writing compares various statistics about the Mall of America in Minnesota and the Mall of Arabia in Dubai -- using raw numbers as commentary about unabated hyper-commercialism.

The video "Sight Reading" explores failure. On three screens, three pianists play for the first time Schumann's Piano Concerto. They start together. As each makes a mistake, that pianist's screen goes black for five seconds before continuing. The others continue uninterrupted -- until they make a mistake and their screen goes black. What begins as

familiar music ends up as disjointed dissonance -- but with each pianist laboring honestly to create artistic perfection.

"She is interested in exploring what happens in that moment when we press the wrong key, and how do we decide to keep going?" Geha said.

Perlin's work is simple and elegiac. Her films arrest you. They make you think.

"Art can be experienced in an instance, but I think once you slow down and try to experience something it is much more gratifying," Geha said.

"Even if it is something you don't like. If you can sit there and wonder, 'Why don't I like this?' instead of dismissing it, I think it can enrich you."