

REGEN PROJECTS

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ART REVIEW

A film debut that resounds

BY SHARON MIZOTA

Photographer Catherine Opie's first film, "The Modernist," follows the exploits of an artist-turned-arsonist who sets his sights on famous L.A. modernist homes.

Screening on a loop in a large, custom-designed theater inside the main gallery at Regen Projects, the 22-minute piece addresses our fascination with midcentury modern architecture and design. The work is in the style of Chris Marker's 1962 film, "La Jetée," told in a series of still images. Marker's post-apocalyptic time-travel tale is well served by this disjunctive storytelling; the film feels like a series of documents from a strange time and place. Opie's effort, while less disjointed, partakes of some of this estrangement, situating dystopian reality closer to home.

Played by Stosh, a.k.a. Pig Pen, a longtime friend and subject of Opie's, the arsonist is a good Hollywood villain, plotting his targets out on a wall. (It's worth noting that L.A.'s modern homes have often served as villain's lairs in films such as "Diamonds Are Forever" and "Lethal Weapon 2.") He clips newspaper articles about California fires and collages them with photographs of famous homes. Eventually he takes the next step, dousing houses, including John Lautner's Chemosphere and Sheats-Goldstein residences, with lighter fluid and striking a match.

This progression from representation to reality — that art should become life — was the modern artist's dream. It's not unlike the American dream, the promise that one's aspirations can be realized.

Some of L.A.'s postwar

modernist houses were supposed to make this dream more attainable. They were to revolutionize home construction, making modern design and convenience mass-produced and affordable. Instead, these structures have become artifacts of a fantasy, mocking the current housing crisis from their hilltop perches.

Opie's protagonist sleeps on the couch in an immaculately curated modernist living room, surrounded by books about L.A. modern architecture and carefully arranged flowers. But he soon tires of longing.

In creating our perfect "Mad Men" interiors, we buy into a nostalgia that comes with racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic baggage. When people say they want to "make America great again," isn't that the America they're talking about?

"The Modernist" is a silent film, except for one moment at the Chemosphere house. The arsonist lights a match and the sound — a sharp hissing and spitting as the flame appears — makes one jump. It marks a pivot, the moment when idea becomes action. Opie's protagonist has chosen to set fire to a failed dream; this spark reminds us that we too have a choice.

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'The Modernist'

Where: Regen Projects, 6750 Santa Monica Blvd., L.A.

When: Through Feb. 17; closed Sundays and Mondays

Info: (310) 276-5424, www.regenprojects.com



CATHERINE OPIE Regen Projects, Los Angeles
"THE MODERNIST," Catherine Opie's first film, reflects on the fascination with midcentury design.