Sue de Beer in her studio in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Her new video has its debut on Thursday.

White Paint, Chocolate, And Postmodern Ghosts

By RANDY KENNEDY

Surveying the row of door buzzers outside the hulking Brooklyn building where the artist Sue de Beer works, it somehow seems fitting to find a lone occupant listed on the building’s top floor, with no further explanation: “GOD.”

“I don’t know who that is or what they do,” Ms. de Beer said, breaking into a laugh when a reporter pointed out the small handwritten label next to the buzzer. “I’ve never really been up to that floor.”

But given the nature of her work and especially her most recent creation — a lush, frankly mystical video piece called “The Ghosts” that will have its debut Thursday in an unlikely place, one of the stately period rooms at the Park Avenue Armory — it is tempting to imagine the Holy Ghost himself at work up there in an old warehouse on the Red Hook flatlands, not far from a dingy bus depot, an Ikea and a discount store called 99 Cent Dreams.

Over the last decade Ms. de Beer has built a cult following for the dark and often disturbing ways that she mixes the profane and the sacred — or at least a postmodern version of the sacred, a longing to escape the confines of ordinary consciousness for something perhaps more beautiful or true.

The exhibition at the Armory and a show of related sculpture to open Feb. 18 at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in Chelsea are the most prominent presentation of Ms. de Beer’s work in the United States since she first became known through her inclusion in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and entered many prominent public collections, like those of the Museum of Modern Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

In the work for which she is best known, videos that Continued on Page 20
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have missed the undertone of youth culture — a critic once described her as “the pre-eminent author of teen angst” — the supernova, or at least supernova-like, has never been quite so front and center as it is in “The Ghosts,” which Ms. de Beers describes as a turning point, three years in the making.

It has never been far outside the frame. The adolescent bedrooms that so often serve as the cenotaphs of her characters, cluttered with posters and gallows and packs of cigarettes, have seemed at times like existential cocoons, where the occupant seems to be a kind of specter, with the help of love or drugs or other psychoticisms.

Lao, for instance, the sensory depriva-
tion tank in which Ms. de Beers spent many dark, quiet hours when she lived in Berlin, with a pyramid of drugs and psychic cigarettes ("It was kind of hot," she said). Or the hypnotist she began to visit there and in New York, who introduced the cen-
taph of the central character in "The Chelsea," a follow-up-hypnotist sys-

tematically by a fellow artist, Jutta Konkel-Aussecker, a painter and au-
tomobile.

"What I wanted was some kind of non-
verbal, non-verbal experience outside myself, something that felt like a state of total belief without having to attribute a belief sys-
tem," Ms. de Beers, 37, said in a recent in-
terview in her studio, where she shot much of the new video in small rooms with the windows blacked out. "But I don’t know if I ever got there.

The new 30-minute two-screen video grows out of a period of desperation in her life, after a year in which she made no art at all. At that time, in 2001, she was trav-
ing almost nonstop, most visits to Ber-
lin, where she had lived for several years, and New York, where she was then an assistant professor at New York University.

"I was bored out of my pants where I just couldn’t do anything creative, and so I actually said to give up, and it was liberating," said Ms. de Beers, who, despite the St lightly nature of her fascination, is ing-

guine and open in person, a quality that is a kind of cloak-and-dagger.

In the winter of her bad year, the year in which she would sit in Berlin in the afternoon, she started venturing out only at night, riding the U-Bahn sub-
 way alone with a notebook, trying to write. Then for two months she locked herself

in a room with only a chair, a desk and a blanket, barely eating.

In doing so, she conjure up ghosts —

frightening-looking men, whoever a visual
debt to Ms. de Beers’s long fascination with horror films and, lately, to the particular bloody 1970s Italian subgenre known as gialli. The ghosts seem to be challenging the viewer to decide whether they are mere memories or parts of something —
substantial or — whether in the end, it is something.

In her early years Ms. de Beers was often

identified among the practitioners of a death-obsessed, neo-Gothic strain of con-
temporary art that emerged after 1989, a
time that included Adrian Piper and Ulrich Almen. But the new work, with playing with those expectations, seems to have become to Proust than to Poe, as a rorschach exami-
nation of memory and the ways it shapes

identity.

"I think that over the last several years she’s developed a signature style and voice that’s all her own," said Lauren Ross, the curator and director of arts programs for the High Line and a former curator at Whitney Museum, which has followed Ms. de Beers’s work. "It’s always seemed to me that she has a certain kind of character, a certain kind of way of dealing with the world, and I think that’s her voice.

"I’ve always found her work to be extremely unsettling. It’s always tak-

ing me out of my comfort zone,"

Dorsey Roesen, one of the founders of Art Production Fund, the nonprofit or-

ganization that is bringing the video to the Armitage with the help of Sotheby’s, the

event’s sponsor, said the fund was in-

terested in helping stage a video project in New York because "video has the ability to bridge a kind of audience gap this exists in contemporary art."

"And she added, "I think that with this work, I’m playing more with the conse-

quences of memory and memory in a way that is going to people, even though it’s not a conventional memory by any means.

"The Ghosts" was conceived and written during a long, bleak winter in Berlin when the artist worked in self-enforced solitude.

Because of great difficulty finding pro-
duction money for the video in 2008 as the
economy plunged, Ms. de Beers’s ghosts were wrapped up secretly on the sly, us-
ing naked assistants spray-painted white to lead the, and chocolate sauce for the body that emerged from the mouth of one of them, all of it transformed later in the editing

room, where she spent months shaping two terabytes hard drives full of footage.

"I was being all this research on how to make a ghost on essentially a two-dollar

budget without making it look just laugh-

ably hilarious," she said.

Her art, which has always worn their high-school appropriation proudly in this
case really needed to do so because of

budget concern. A few helpers built a set in a Trans Am wood — complete with the

phantoms dead dogs know in its day as the

screening blank — spending little more than a cent. Insane, for the camera to make the experience more enjoyable, the tiny real filming, Ms. de Beers

said, was bringing a cat trainer and a large white ventriloquist arm, known as "A

when the specter appeared, as a way to explain. (Neocolonialism also appeared in a 2009 video.)

Ms. de Beers met Mr. Spencer through the members of a German band called the

Corinna Kehl. He said he became involved partly because he described the project

and he is a fan of the genre. But during the shooting, which he

co-ordinated, the film ran over the Australian tour schedule, he was unsure at times what he had gotten himself into.

"Things were always a little vague, even sometimes the idea where I was sup-
pose to show up," he said. "I don’t know if she was doing this to incite any sense of
distortion, to keep me in the dark, but I guess if it was, it was more kinds of worker, it was a strange experience that was.

Ms. de Beers, who doesn’t like to
tained secrecy over her works, said she

was drawn to Mr. Spencer mostly because of his woodland voice and "world-her face" and was pleased with the character he

helped bring to life, but the difficulties are enormous. She seems to be trying to exercise a kind of

sensibility against her and the dead only so that he can leave, her, repairing her for

abundant, holy. (The dependable dialogue in the video was written by Alissa Kemeny, who has collaborated with Ms. de Beers be-

cause, and by Ms. Kemeny.)

Ms. de Beers said during the interview in her studio on Monday that the video was "really very personal for me, partly because of it's
t's personal dimension of her work is recent years. A 2006 video, "The Quaking," set

in a cartoonish period New England,
delved into the spectral nothing of the French musician-sculptor from the American middle decades, playing a role in the Handful of an Angry God." Putting the Jea-

nson Edwards was tenacious in prob-

ably the strongest cover it has ever

had itself. Ms. de Beers has also borrowed from the dark, violent post-religiousmys-

ics of the surrealist Dees Drew. From his novel "Patrick," used in a 2005 video video, "I could sense the other dimension right now if I wanted. I could stay here with you. I’ve had other roles."

But Ms. de Beers said that her fascination with ghosts is in one sense simply about

finding a way to explore how we all must deal with the past and what we give

older, a struggle that finds a metaphor in the arthritic process itself.

"As an artist, you shed all these objects which were the ‘yes’ back in the moment when you understood," she said. "And then you go back and hardly recognize them and feel like the person who made them wasn’t there but someone else, like a writer or something. And you wonder 'What was she like?'"