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Gerard Byrne: ‘Why It’s Time for Imperial, Again’

By KEN JOHNSON NOV. 8, 2012

Itinerant Protocinema

31 Ludlow Street, Lower East Side

Through Nov. 25

Gerard Byrne’s seven-minute video “Why It’s Time for Imperial, Again” is brilliant, funny and remarkably prescient. This terrific Irish artist made it in 1997, and it dramatizes a conversation from 1980, but as a meditation on consumerism, urban decay, the energy crisis and the automobile industry, it is as relevant as ever. Its presentation here in a former Chinese deli by the curators Rose Lord and Mari Spirito of Itinerant/Protocinema, a nonprofit exhibiting enterprise, also invites timely thought about trade relations between the United States and China today.

Showing on a flat screen in an installation resembling a contemporary television studio, the video features a dialogue between a salesman and a potential customer, played by a pair of notably wooden actors. They appear in different parts of a bleak industrial area. As they stroll along a much-littered railroad track and have coffee in a downscale diner, the salesman describes the new Chrysler Imperial. His pitch is oddly stilted, as if he had memorized it from an advertising brochure.

“Frank,” he points out, “The only option on the Imperial is a power sliding roof. Every luxury is standard. We have more luxuries standard than any car in America.” Frank asks softball questions and offers responses like, “It looks rich, Lee.”

It could almost be a Beckett play. In fact, the dialogue comes from an interview between Lee Iacocca, then the chairman of Chrysler, and Frank Sinatra. It was published as an advertising supplement in the November 1980 issue of National Geographic magazine.

Correction: November 12, 2012

An earlier version of a headline with this review misstated the given name of the artist.

As the review states, he is Gerard Byrne, not Gerald.

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