

## Dead Again

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Left: Artists Slater Bradley and Ed Lachman. Right: Whitney Museum chief curator Donna De Salvo with Whitney Museum director Adam Weinberg. (Photos: John Arthur Peetz)

**ENTERING THE WHITNEY** last Thursday night to catch the debut of *Shadow*, a video collaboration between artist Slater Bradley and cinematographer Ed Lachman, I was feeling underdressed. The lobby and the second floor (where the video was screening) were populated by the kind of well-heeled young aristocrats that one usually finds at, well, a charity gala for the Whitney. (Characteristically, the real socialites seemed to be huddled around the bar and potato chips downstairs.) Unfortunately, I had missed the plethora of models surrounding Patrick Dempsey at the actual Versace-sponsored Gala three nights prior. Remembering that this was the Upper East Side, I quickly determined that these fashionable hedge fund managers and their spouses were probably members of the museum's under-forty donors club and were here for the opening of the Paul Thek retrospective and "Modern Life: Edward Hopper and His Time," not the bleak, surreal short film I was about to witness.

Inspired by the unfinished 1993 movie *Dark Blood* (shot by Lachman and directed by George Sluizer), which was the last set River Phoenix left before OD'ing on a heroin-cocaine-Xanax cocktail outside the Viper Room on the Sunset Strip, *Shadow* finds Bradley continuing his obsession with breathing new life into dead stars (Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson). Here, the artist's "doppelgänger" Ben Brock plays Phoenix playing the half-Navajo widower from Sluizer's film during the nights and days just before the original film's script begins. In *Dark Blood*, a Hollywood jet-set couple (Judy Davis and Jonathan Pryce) break down in the Utah desert where Phoenix lives alone amid dilapidated houses near a nuclear testing ground. Phoenix mourns his Navajo wife, who died of cancer from latent radiation, and, quickly falling for Davis, keeps the couple trapped on the compound so he can start a new life with her. Needless to say, things end as badly in the film as they did for Phoenix in life.

*Shadow*, a gorgeously shot, elliptical short, is a Möbius-strip mininarrative that could have been co-written by Samuel Beckett and Cormac McCarthy. The Brock/Phoenix character is shown walking out of the desert night with a lantern and into another lonely day in his ghost town. He kicks around, rants and mumbles to himself, finds an old *Playboy* in an abandoned house, discovers a little girl with a mutilated doll in a trailer, drives the girl out into the middle of nowhere, and drops her off, giving her a pistol holster containing a music box ("Strangers in the Night") and saying, "This will protect you." Later, he's seen sitting by a campfire at night in another spot in the middle of nowhere, burning a *Playboy* centerfold (not the one he picked up earlier, interestingly), with a kachina doll at his side. He's last shown walking into the pitch-black distance with a lantern—the beginning of the sequence that will continue at the start of the film.



The crowd watching *Shadow*. (Photo: Matthew Carasella)

After watching this three times, I emerged back into the crowd of overdressed socialites milling about the Hopper show. (Hopper himself must be rolling in his grave; nighthawks at the diner these were not.) I went downtown for the postshow dinner hosted by Team Gallery—also celebrating the opening of “The Estate of Chris Vassell”—at Kenmare (excellent cocktails and canapés) and found myself chatting with Lachman over dessert. Something of a stealth operator for such a distinguished cameraman, Lachman started with Herzog and Wenders and has since quietly amassed an impressive, mostly indie filmography, including standout work for [Steven Soderbergh](#), [Robert Altman](#), and the two Todds (Solondz and Haynes).

Quizzed about his favorite black-and-white cinematographers, Lachman gave props to noir master John Alton and Fellini’s genius cameraman Otello Martelli. He tries to use color the way they used black-and-white film, he said, with an eye for aesthetics that transcend realism. (Hence the Technicolor palette of Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* [2002] and the equally vibrant hues of *Shadow*, which evoke a digital-video version of John Ford’s *The Searchers* [1956].) Pressed on the second-class citizenship cinematographers endure in Hollywood, Lachman was gracious. He did allow that there’s only so much a great cameraman can do for a lousy director. Mediocre directors often hire top talent to cover for their failings, but the medium doesn’t work that way, Lachman said. While Bradley’s past efforts have been interesting and well received, if a tad ghoulish, *Shadow* wouldn’t have had the same impact had it not been shot by an artist of Lachman’s caliber. Near the end of dinner, someone whispered to me that the piece really was about Bradley discovering Lachman; I would agree.

— Andrew Hultkrans

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