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CHICAGO GUIDE TO INDEPENDENT AND UNDERGROUND CINEMA

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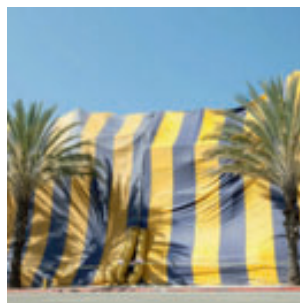
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C I N E - L I S T

:: FRIDAY, AUGUST 10 - THURSDAY, AUGUST 16 ::



CRUCIAL VIEWING

Lisa Truttmann's **TARPAULINS** (New Documentary)

The Nightingale (1084 N. Milwaukee Ave.) — Friday, 8pm

Austrian artist/filmmaker Lisa Truttmann's delightful **TARPAULINS** begins with a meditation on traditions: documenting the raising of a Circus Vargas tent in a Southern California parking lot, Truttmann notes that many of the carnival workers she's depicting were born into their trade and marry among their own, producing new generations of circus performers. What draws her to this scene, however, is neither the trade nor the lineage, but simply the raw material of the tarpaulin from which the tent, like the dozens of fumigation tents Truttmann photographs across greater Los Angeles, is fashioned. At several points in this restlessly creative 80-minute landscape essay, Truttmann returns to the subject of generations and traditions, as when a Mexican pest-control worker describes the roles his adult children now play in his tenting business. Tenting and

fumigation is built into the life cycle of LA homes; when houses go on the market, termite inspection and extermination are often part of the negotiation. This fact ensures that neighborhoods throughout the city are spotted with the bright, colorful “temporary sculptures” that prove so fascinating to Truttmann; to a recently-displaced Angeleno, it also indicates the real-estate churn that is displacing communities that have lived in the city for generations. It’s easy to be dazzled by the aesthetics of these momentary edifices, as it is to take Truttmann’s uniformly immaculate compositions and dexterous montages at face value. Teeming with bold little ideas, the film rethinks itself faster than the viewer can put it all together, and it’s tempting—and totally rewarding—to let the film’s larger argument slip out of focus. But there’s a lot going on under the brilliant surface, not least when one thinks about TARPAULINS—as Truttmann undoubtedly does—in light of its own tradition. Each year, under influential filmmaker-educators like Lee Anne Schmitt, James Benning, and Thom Andersen, the CalArts Film/Video MFA harvests a fresh crop of psychogeographies, essay films, and formalist landscape studies; Truttmann graduated in 2015. Notwithstanding a decade’s worth of exceptional Southland studies by the likes of Brigid McCaffrey, Laida Lertxundi, Laura Kraning, and Alexandra Cuesta, it’s valid to wonder whether the CalArts school of geography hasn’t assumed the “square, boxed-in shape and gemlike inertia” film critic Manny Farber diagnosed of so-called “White Elephant Art.” Think of that shape as the frame of a house—sturdy, perhaps, but also inflexible and unfilled. TARPAULINS gets around that shape in two ways: the way of the tarp and the way of the termite. The tarp, for Truttmann, reupholsters that tried-and-true structure, adding color, movement, and contour while preserving the stable frame of its tradition. The termite, on the other hand, is “ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it.” In Farber’s 1962 essay “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art”—which makes its appearance so late in TARPAULINS that it feels like a spoiler to quote from it—the irony is that both kinds of art are defined by hyperactivity—the former, like the tarp, “[fills] every pore of a work with glinting, darting Style and creative Vivacity”; the latter “goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.” What to make of such an incessantly clever, stylish film? If TARPAULINS is termite art, why does it feel so crystalline, so conscientiously organized? If it’s just a renovation of familiar traditions, why does it keep asking questions—about power, about climate, about art itself—which its exquisite images, sounds, voices, and ideas can’t answer? Ultimately, TARPAULINS is itself as ambivalent about where it fits in the white elephant art vs. termite art debate as it is about the termite itself. As the film points out, termites and earthquakes are ultimately just conditions of life in Southern California—perhaps, so are landscape films. If so, let’s hope that future generations can make them as witty, surprising, and ingenious as this one. *Truttmann in attendance.* (2017, 78 min, Digital Projection) **MM**