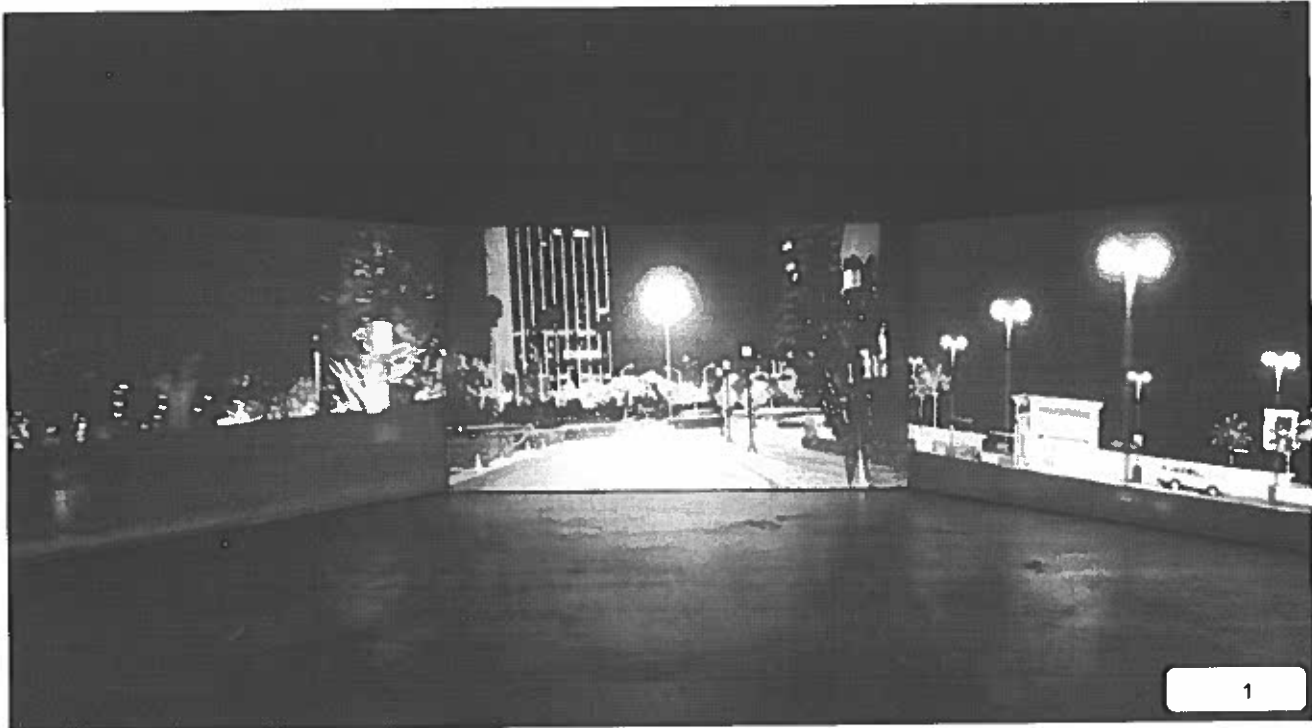


OCWEEKLY

'Salo Island' Offers Four Shades of Fascism At UC Irvine's CAC Gallery

BY DAVE BARTON

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A Fashion Island drive-by

Dave Barton

The Marquis de Sade was rotting away in the Bastille of pre-revolutionary France when he wrote one of his first pornographic novels, *120 Days of Sodom*. A mind-boggling litany of sexual perversion, the plot is about a foursome of wealthy French elite—a Judge, a Bishop, a Banker and a Cardinal—who kidnap a group of boys and girls, take them to an isolated castle, and then humiliate, rape and murder them. Heinous masturbatory material that it is, it's also a grimly funny social commentary, with the degenerate Marquis pointing fingers at fellow travelers in his own social class, people who were doing things he only *fantasized* about.

In 1975, Marxist Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini used the infamous book as source material for his film *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, considered by many critics the most controversial movie of all time. Changing the setting from France to the last Fascist holdout of Mussolini's Italy, Pasolini's film doesn't have the Marquis' mordant sense of humor; playing things deadly serious, the bold visualization of the novel's atrocities turns the political tract into cinema's first torture porn.

Shortly before the film's release, Pasolini was brutally murdered, supposedly by a teenage male prostitute who ran over him with his own car on a desolated beach. Believed at the time to be a sex deal gone bad, the murderer (who had right-wing ties) has since recanted his confession, claiming Pasolini was assassinated for his politics, as well as his open homosexuality. Fascists apparently don't take kindly to portrayals of themselves as ass-licking, shit-eating, child murderers.

There isn't a single moment of anal rape in Mexican video artist Yoshua Okón's acerbic take on de Sade and Pasolini, "Salo Island," a two-film installation running until March 15 at UC Irvine's CAC Gallery. Save the source light from the four screens the films are simultaneously playing on (one on one screen, the second on three others), the CAC is pitch-black—disconcertingly so. Stepping from the lit hallway into the dark space is a mind wipe. The feeling? Immediate dread.

The first screen at right is a shot of a stretch of beach, with not a soul in sight, lit so just the sand is visible. Foot indentations and tire tracks can be made out, but nothing else; the splash of water at ocean's edge can be heard, but it's hidden in blackness. Without warning, the camera jumps violently, and a car motor rages. The effect—mimicking what Pasolini's last moments may have looked like from inside the car, complete with the thump and jerk as the car hits and runs over something large—is deeply unsettling. Not a drop of blood is visible, but the murder it references and the loud, uncomfortable soundtrack jarringly makes this scary as fuck.

The sickening thuds and gunned motor can be heard intermittently throughout the multi-projection of the second film, adding to its subtle tension: On a triptych of screens, we're in another car, this time gliding quietly through the late-night environs of Fashion Island. An isolated, oddly erotic bastion of light and shadow, bluntly wasting energy late at night, the glowing storefronts and corporate brand names in between the slips of black feels decidedly funereal. The camera in Pasolini's film is mostly stationary, rarely moving, refusing to cut away from its in-your-face horror show; while Okón is not directly quoting Pasolini here, the expensive sedans prowling poor areas of town for sexual cannon fodder comes to mind, as Okón's three screens (and three camera angles) surround your field of vision, putting you in the predator's seat. The slow-motion travel allows us to take in every detail: Bloomingdale's, Neiman Marcus, Forever 21, even the Barnes & Noble Café Bakery has an opaque, dull gold chill to it, the shine on the Irvine Co.'s manufactured Eden permanently tarnished.

The most overt link to Pasolini are Okón's shots of the naked slave dogs—nude human beings on their hands and knees, barking and yipping for scraps—being "walked" on a leash. The Italian filmmaker's brutalized beauties aren't slim and attractive in Okón's take; they're gray-haired, bloated with the years, tethered to a younger man dressed in khakis and a blue sweater. Newport Beach prep, to be sure, but he also looks like any number of salesmen at your local big-box superstore, the geriatric "animals" still society's bitch, chained to him as they sniff out something to fill their saggy guts. Walking past such corporate logos as the multinational Chase Bank, one thinks of such multiheaded demon dogs as Cerberus guarding Hell.

Fashion Island's own fetishistic aspects bring to mind images and ideas from the film and novel: the fortress-like walls, elitism, perfectly manicured medians of vegetation, the servants at your beck and call, the conspicuous consumption, conformity, expensive junk food and the overwhelming whiteness, the castle's denizens blithely unaware of the economic war going on just outside.

Leave it to a Mexican to remind us why the popular nickname of the shopping center is Fascist Island.

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