

A Life of Errors  
Nicholas & Sheila Pye

Imagine your tongue touching another person's opened eye or someone prying your eyelids apart to lick the lens through which you view the world. This bodily expression of trust, receptivity, and vulnerability is enacted by husband-wife collaborators Sheila and Nicholas Pye in their 2004 16-mm film (transferred to DVD for presentation in the gallery) *The Paper Wall*. The gesture, both intimate and disturbing, recalls the violence done to eyes in the name of relationships gone awry from *Oedipus* to *Un Chien Andalou*. In their films and photographs, the Pyes explore the troubling ground where a connection between two people becomes so intense that it confounds or replaces the human instinct to preserve self.

In *The Paper Wall*, the artists take their bodies through a physical investigation of desire and longing, performing demanding actions that imply an inescapable cause-effect dynamic between two highly attracted entities, literally kept apart by a wall. These characters are identified as the "black-haired sister" (Sheila) and "blond-haired brother" (Nicholas), placing their interactions in a complicated limbo between innocent play and co-dependent transgression. Expected as well as normally suppressed signs of intimacy are presented in sequences of kissing, a scab being picked, incontinence, spitting, and breathing—as one of the pair breathes out, the other seems to inhale the expelled breath.

During a particularly telling scene, Sheila walks as if emptied of free will toward the wall, while Nicholas sits in the room opposite, hunching his shoulders and reaching for his stomach in distress. When Sheila's head hits the wall, Nicholas instantaneously falls over in his chair. Despite this desperate magnetism, the merging of their worlds remains incomplete. Sheila stays cloistered in her pink-and-yellow-flower wallpapered room, while Nicholas's impenetrable domain—as one might expect from persistent cultural definitions of gender, which are another target of the film—is defined by a more masculine blue-grey pattern.

According to the artists, 2006's *A Life of Errors* shows the same characters at a more mature phase of life. With this film, the barrier between sister and brother, female and male, lover and lover, has been removed, and the consequences are deadly. Compelled beyond reason, the figures wage a war with one another—grabbing tokens of the other's person (locks of hair are slyly snipped) and setting traps. Perhaps most unsettling of all, the attacks are executed consensually. A blindfolded Nicholas allows Sheila to lead him around and over sharp and broken objects as the soles of his feet are cut. In a parallel, climatic scene, Sheila is guided by Nicholas into a circle defined by a fuse. She, masked and docile, jumps rope as he sets the ring on fire. The flames, her activity, and (metaphorically) the violent passion that hangs over the entire scenario consume all the oxygen in the small space, causing Sheila to collapse. Nicholas meets his

own fate when he delivers Sheila's lifeless body to her bed only to fall over a rope that she has rigged to trip him.

The artists conceive and construct the visually striking sets for their films, carefully choosing objects with personal significance to fill the rooms their characters will inhabit. For instance, in both works Sheila's space includes an empty birdcage, an object drawn from her childhood memories that also suggests Surrealist painting. The Pyes spend up to a month building these environments, which at once evoke a nostalgic and deconstructed sense of domesticity. Related photographs make use of the sets to develop themes from the films in further directions. In the still images, Sheila and Nicholas, among other things, move toward each other in a tooth-baring embrace, swing at one another from ropes, and stoically sit on a bed with their heads effaced. Despite these aggressive aspects, the couple is always pictured as physically close, underscoring the irresolvable bind of two beings that can neither completely combine nor extricate themselves from one another.

Currently based in Toronto, Nicholas was born in Torquay, England in 1976 and Sheila was born in Hamilton, Canada in 1978.

-Kristen Hileman

Kristen Hileman is Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC and an adjunct faculty member at George Washington University and the Corcoran College of Art & Design.