



greengrassi, London, UK

Five chairs, a candelabra, a clock and a cat. These are the mute players in the mysterious drama that Kristin Oppenheim titles 'The Thief' (2007). Whether they are witnesses or evidence is not made clear; certainly they are missing items, represented in their absence by simple acrylic brushstrokes on paper or, in the case of the hirsute and tubby cat, a photograph. All are presented in lavish, reproduction gilt frames and hung low on black-painted walls in the gallery.

In contrast to these stark and self-contained visual aids, the woolly core of the narrative resides in a soundtrack that fills the space from speakers mounted in the corners of the room. Four sequences, each around a minute long, play in succession, each building into what at first resembles a tumbling avalanche of ambient noise, sampled sounds and dialogue. On repeated listening,

however, it becomes clear that each is underscored with a recurring pattern of sounds: hurried footsteps, a reverberating chime, a man's panting breath, a telephone dial tone, a dog barking. On three of the four tracks parts of telephone conversations between two women can be heard - dominated by the crackly voice of the woman on the other end of the phone but interrupted by occasional comments by the clearer speaker at our end.

Only snatches of this dialogue can be discerned, but the tone of the voices and the occasional phrase suggest a mother-daughter dynamic: distracted laughter, idle 'uh-huh's, and a yelled aside to someone off-stage. However, this mundane domestic exchange is cast in an eerily Gothic light; creepy atmospheric sound effects that are familiar as tension-building devices in horror-movie soundtracks create a sense of portent that never reveals its cause or hints at resolution. Claps of thunder, echoing metallic crashes and a shrill whistle like

**Kristin Oppenheim**  
*Untitled (Queen Anne Chair)*  
2007  
Pencil and acrylic on paper  
102×81 cm

the noise of demonic cicadas suggest that these women are caught up in stormy and perilous circumstances to which they remain apparently oblivious. This technique, used in cinema to flood an otherwise innocent scenario with significance, is so familiar that it seems natural mentally to project Oppenheim's sound-scape as a series of cutaways, montages and split screens.

In 'The Thief', however, Oppenheim cuts up and reconfigures not only sounds and images but also conventions and tropes in narrative presentation. She plays her cinematic references against an operatic theatricality, which is conjured both by the darkened and spot-lit gallery installation and in her classification of the audio tracks as acts. Act I is titled 'The Chase', the second is 'The Wolf', the third is 'The Liar' and the last 'The Thief'. Since they play in rotation, it is never quite clear which is which, but this indeterminacy seems fitting with their recurring and overlapping motifs. Oppenheim also gives the date as '2006/7 to be continued', indicating that this is an accumulating work, a serialized drama whose future direction and final outcome are not yet decided. This approach has more in common with the mock-museological display of the images in the installation: five chairs, each based on a different antique style but upholstered in the same red fabric, present a series of alternatives, neither parts of a set nor drastically different. Perhaps the sound-pieces are not so much parts of a continuous narrative as divergent outcomes of a generic starting-point.

It is certainly true that, despite its engagement with narrative forms, 'The Thief' offers up more in the way of interference with these forms than a satisfyingly unwinding chain of meaning. However, what is most perplexing about the work is that in its spare specificity it constantly suggests connections waiting to be made and a riddle to be solved. Questions queue up to be answered. Why is the cat represented by a photograph rather than a painting? What is the significance of the selection of 18th-century chair designs detailed in the works' titles? And who is the running man whose footsteps and panting breaths fill the gallery through every audio track? It is likely that he is the eponymous thief, but without knowing what has been stolen, let alone why, it seems rash to start pointing fingers.

On closer inspection the painting of the clock - *Untitled (Mantle Clock)* (2007) - has a scribbled note to one side of it: 'I went with Janice to this one party. A guy we met two weeks ago in a bar. He plays in a band and we went and watched him play. I did hair on Friday.' Just as we think we may have stumbled on a vital clue in the case, Oppenheim leaves us high and dry on a plateau of banality. It becomes clear that what she really wants from us is not the delivery of a stamped and sealed conclusion, but some leg-work; she wants us to look and listen and to become aware of ourselves doing so - in a sense, to hear ourselves thinking. No matter how frustrating that may seem.

**Jonathan Griffin**

# Kristin Oppenheim