

Eye of the terrier

Conceptual artist
Jana Sterbak talks to
Hettie Judah about her
collaboration with a dog

Jana Sterbak moved from the former Czechoslovakia to Canada with her parents as a teenager. While she describes her adoptive country as a place of optimism, she wryly notes: "My understanding of the uses of irony originates from my Czech background. It is something that is not easily found in the North American setting."

Sterbak is best known for conceptual works that generate striking, even iconic, images: *Generic Man* (1987), a portrait of the back of a man's head with a barcode tattooed across his neck; *Vanitas* (1987), a size 38 dress stitched together out of raw meat; *Dissolution* (2001), a group of chairs with ice seats. Even where these objects were designed to self-destruct, they were beautifully documented and archived.

Sterbak has always been interested in testing the physical frailty that lies within a race that still thinks of itself in majestic, heroic terms. It is perhaps for this reason that for two of the major works to be shown in Brussels she has ceded a degree of artistic control to a Jack Russell terrier. Ridiculous? Certainly. Insulting? Quite probably. Sterbak's two video installations filmed by Stanley the dog see her engage in the well-known artistic practice of nose-thumbing: towards the 'gifted eye' of other video artists and *auteur* film makers, toward the carefully framed tradition of landscape photography and towards the veneration of European cultural heritage that encourages us to imagine that we will be made great by proximity to beauty and architecture.

The two installations, *From Here To There* (2003) and *Waiting For High Water* (2005), were filmed respectively on the banks of the Saint Laurence River in Canada and in Venice. Via Stanley we are introduced to a primal world domi-



Barking mad? Jana Sterbak thumbs her nose at the art world in her work

nated by smell and sensation, whether in the vast expanses of the New World or among the cramped architectural glories of the old.

The Canadian film was accidental – the result of Stanley's test shoots to see how he would cope with the camera and the water – but the footage that emerged from the process held a fascination of its own for Sterbak. "Before doing this filming, I had spent a decade outside of Canada, in France and Spain," she says, in an email interview. "This enabled me to look with fresh eyes. What is most impressive about Canada is the land: its scale and emptiness. One can easily experience the 'majestic sublime'.

"There is also the transformative aspect of the blanket of snow, which covers everything in winter. The scale changes, the distances become unknowable, colour is reduced, sound changes in the frigid air and lack of soft and absorbent surfaces. The physical aspect of the [video] installation means to convey

some of these factors. A year later I was able to finish the Venice project: it was not planned this way but it became something of a contrast."

Over the last 30 years, Sterbak has repeatedly examined wildness and control; one film, 1986's *Artist As A Combustible*, even shows her with tall flames leaping from a mound of gunpowder on her head. There are the aforementioned works with meat and ice, and Stanley was, if not entirely wild, at least something of a chaotic force. Even Venice, as a subject for an artwork, can be seen as the site of a constant battle for control over the elements. "It is a major human theme. Since my work deals with our condition as humans in this universe we try to dominate, it is, I suppose, inevitable that this issue of our endeavour to control our circumstance, physical and otherwise, comes up."

For an artist who uses cutting-edge equipment (the tiny camera strapped on Stanley was designed for medical research), she has a measured relationship with technology. When I ask why she doesn't show her video art on the internet, she politely reproves: "We are physical beings and can never fit all our cravings and aspiration into a two-dimensional media that privileges only a certain aspect of our sensorial apparatus."

Her reservations are based on fears not of technology itself, but the arrogance it instils in man's relationship with nature. "When I was a child, we all learned a song that goes: 'We'll command the wind and rain!' Well, by now we have seen the results of this kind of thinking." ■

From Here To There is at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, 23 Rue Ravenstein, Brussels (centre), June 3 to July 2, tel 02.507.83.89. About Winter is at the Erna Hécey Gallery, 1C Rue Des Fabriques, Brussels (centre), June 2 to July 1, tel 02.502.00.25.