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Three Connecticut museums + 45 hotel rooms + 1 master artist = '50,000 Beds'

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Admit it. You've wondered. Who are those people in the adjacent hotel room? And what are they doing in there?

For that matter, who were the strangers who were in your room? And what did they do in there?

In spite — or perhaps because of — their resolute sterility, hotel rooms are freighted with yeasty possibilities. They are intimate and furtive; public and exchangeable. That stale, disinfected aroma that permeates even the best of them, gives a hotel room a sense of slightly veiled drama, as if something perverse or pathetic occurred here and needed to be wiped clean. Their refreshing anonymity gives rise to a whole genre of lurid and soul-draining dramas, somewhere between John Cheever and Barton Fink.

So it's surprising no one has thought of Chris Doyle's masterful "50,000 Beds" before. Doyle, a multidisciplinary artist with a Harvard degree in architecture, found himself with a plum assignment a few years back. Curators from three aesthetically similar Connecticut museums — the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Artspace New Haven and Real Art Ways in Hartford — asked Doyle, a Brooklyn artist, to create a project that would run simultaneously at their institutions.

Doyle, an artist who has made disturbingly animate videos of mostly inanimate objects, responded magnanimously, reeling in 45 artists to tackle a subject that had long perplexed him: the familiar and yet exotic hotel room.

In a project that is as much Albert Camus as Alfred Hitchcock, Doyle sent 45 different artists to 45 hotel rooms in Connecticut to make short videos. Each was set in a different hotel, motel or inn. The results of their labors are now playing at all three museums. Doyle is impresario, conductor and set designer, constructing the creepily

workman-like series of planks, ramps and railings that lead viewers up, in and through the exhibit.

The effect is a bit like being a rodent let loose in the ventilation system. And one feels somehow vermin-like, scurrying and peering through the screens and scrim, big and small, behind which these narratives unfold. This is the kind of surveillance that civil libertarians insist is imminent, if not extant; and the prurient lust after. For the rest of us, it may be either perversely captivating — why is watching an 11-year-old boy shave so queerly engrossing — or just yucky. An old man encouraging a Lolita to raise and lower her dress should give any reasonable person the willies.

What's interesting about Doyle's premise is that all 45 artists went off in wildly different directions. While it's inevitable that at least one would have to take on a sexual encounter, what's chilling is the way he does it.

Dread Scott's "Homeland Invasion," at the Aldrich, is a grainy black-and-white video of a heterosexual encounter that is time and date stamped, with the helpful coordinates "Room 314" and "Cam A." What is disturbing about this video is not the sex (though it's not something you want to take your toddler to), it's the insinuation that this whole idea of sanctuary is a farce.

Scott's video is not so much lurid as it is disquieting. This is Hoover's FBI at its worst, salaciously slurping up carnal encounters of the ordinary and insignificant.

Of course, not everybody looks at a hotel room as a setting of concupiscence. In fact, the better videos here, like "Nathan," at the Aldrich; "Cart Raid" in New Haven; and "Séance of Maths," at the Aldrich depict bizarre behavior that is even more disturbing. "Nathan," a video of what one highly strung-out man in a business suit does in his hotel room, is "Risky Business" meets "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." A youngish man lies on and then writhes and wraps and rolls himself up in the increasingly confining linens that, let's face it, drive most of us crazy. Here's an overtaxed dude who seems to want out of the business world to open his own yoga studio.

The video works because it exemplifies the confining contrivances of uniformity that can unnerve anyone who has stayed in one too many chain hotel rooms. In fact, if you are staying in a hotel room in the near future, you may want to sidestep "50,000 Beds." Perhaps not everyone stands on top of a hotel desk or swings a light bulb cable around their head like a lasso. But it's creepy to think they might.

It's equally disquieting to fully recognize that another human being is scouring your bathtub. Of course it's not your bathtub, but everybody's bathtub, which can make anybody a little squeamish. Some of the better videos explore hotel housekeeping, but few match the parallelism of "Visible" at Artspace. Here, in a double screen, a guest goes through his arrival, sleep and ablutions while, in the opposite screen, the housekeeper, Eileen Horn, of Washington, Conn., tells her story a la Studs Terkel. What you realize is how necessary it is to depersonalize and distance the housekeeping staff to preserve the illusion of intimacy they destroy.

"Séance of Maths" is such a quirky gem that it deserves screening on its own. It's a piece of psycho-fantasy about a brother and sister who literally meet one another when they come flying through each other's hotel room ceiling. All sorts of other things come in, too, including what must have been a very inattentive mother.

What some viewers may find disturbing about the exhibit is its insistent din. There are headphones available and you're encouraged to use them. But the din, coupled with the visual cacophony, is part of the point.

This is what happens when we intrude on the intimate moments of strangers who happened to converge in the same strange place. A little knowledge, Doyle seems to suggest, is a dangerous, not to mention disquieting, thing. Best to attend to the message on the door handle: Do not disturb.

The exhibit continues at three venues:

nThrough Sept. 15, Artspace, 50 Orange St., New Haven. Tel: 203-772-2709 Web: www.artspacenh.org

nThrough Sept. 3 at Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 St. Ridgefield. Tel: (203) 438-4519. Web: www.aldrichart.org

nThrough Sept. 23 at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor St., Hartford. Tel: (860) 232.1006. Web: www.realartways.org.