

**URSULA MAYER**  
**Zeitkristalle / The Crystals of Time**

**Exhibition Duration: 5 October 2007 – 17 February 2008**

**Presse Date: 4 October 2007, 10 am**

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**Ian White**  
**Crystal Gazes**

Ursula Mayer's Trilogy – *33 Portland Place*, *Keeling House* and *Villa Mairea* (2005/6) – stands in relation to her subsequent work like a blueprint. The three films seem to map three unique and historically important architectural spaces while metaphorically mapping the artist's interests and methods that find an apt crystallisation in her new film *The Crystal Gaze* (2007). Each of the three buildings the trilogy explores is occupied by a single woman who moves between rooms, up and down stairs, who we glimpse like a fragment of an ongoing narrative to which we only have partial access as Mayer's camera glides across or away from her, or strokes the detail of an interior. But these are not documentaries. Mayer has shifted the function of the rooms, rearranged furniture, positioned lights and manipulated the soundtracks so that what we view are versions of these spaces that are as fictional as the figure and as constructed as the camera that wanders through them. That is, the essence of these buildings translated into the space, time and light of the image become fiction, and as such are attempts at the essence of Cinema.

In *The Crystal Gaze* three women similarly occupy the stunning interior of Eltham Palace in south London. Their immaculate period costumes, ropes of pearls, and arrangements of crystal glass perfectly reflect the art deco details of the walls – part fantastical and part representational wooden in-lays of places the former owners visited - exotic, actual and imaginary dramas. Like the women in the Trilogy these women move with almost imperceptible steps through space, but unlike those women in the Trilogy they are not silent. Written by Mayer and sometimes actually

spoken while at others spoken as a voice over, their script is a disorientating yet seamless collection of self-reflective ambiguous and near-abstract melodrama that continuously addresses an equally ambiguous “you.” Are these women referring to each other in a game of petty dressing-room competition? Are they addressing us as viewers? Or are they talking to themselves, addressing themselves? If the answer to this question is “all of the above” then the clues to it are found in the concerns of the Trilogy.

Just as the real subject/s of the Trilogy are not the buildings in which the films are shot, so in *The Crystal Gaze* the prism in which these women are trapped is not that of their actual lives – they appear here as historical tropes of glamorous actresses – but neither are they strictly characters in a conventional narrative. What they articulate is the fact of their own bodies-become-images, exquisitely fragmented and reflected in the metaphor of our and their crystal gazes. As the opening bars of Peggy Lee’s *Is That All There Is?* are played and they break into tragic-comic song the message is both high-camp relief and the damnation of a fascination with the screen. What they embody is something like a distillation of Cinema: neither history nor biography, but quite simply the unbearable seduction of an image that we cannot enter but from which we can neither escape.

Ian White is Adjunct Film Curator at the White Chapel Gallery, London. He works on own projects and works as author and artist.