



FROM SEAN KELLY GALLERY

Laurent Grasso's video "Polair" is dominated by shots of Berlin's iconic TV tower, but something else is visible: a cloud of ghostly white particles drifting through the air.

Berlin and Rome, inside the box

BY MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

The latest exhibition in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's ongoing "Black Box" program of film and video art invites visitors to zen out a little bit. At the same time, it might make some of them freak out a little bit, too.

Located on the museum's lower level, "Black Box: Laurent Grasso" consists of two videos, each running eight to nine minutes. The first, called "Polair," is projected directly onto a gallery wall, which it fills with mostly static shots of Berlin. In addition to scenes that could have been shot anywhere — a street lamp here, trees blowing in the wind there, the facade of a depressingly anonymous building — the piece is dominated by shots of the city's iconic Fernseh-turm, or TV tower, a monumental structure that resembles a gigantic car antenna with a tennis ball stuck on top.

The video is static in more ways than one. It's accompanied by a white-noise soundtrack that's halfway between waves crashing on a meditation CD and the annoying crackle of a badly tuned radio. As you listen and look at the scenery for a while, you'll start to see

something mysterious — like energy made visible — floating around all those stationary objects.

A cloud of ghostly white particles is drifting through the air.

What are they? The New York-based French-Italian artist has described them as electrically charged pollen. But one minute they look like spectral dandelion seeds or microscopic protozoans swimming in liquid, and the next they look like Dementors, those wraithlike creatures from the "Harry Potter" books and films. They're clingy and vaguely creepy, in the way they seem to stick to things, reminding us of an unseen world — of radiation, radio waves and other pollutants — that surrounds us, innocently or otherwise.

A similarly ambiguous vibe emanates from "Les Oiseaux," Grasso's second video, here displayed on a small television monitor in a corner near a couple of comfortable chairs. Over the skyline of Rome, identifiable by the dome of St. Peter's Basilica, a flock of something else — this time something black — swoops and careers in wild arcs. As French speakers will have guessed from the title, they're birds. But their crazy, swarming behavior feels

malevolent, even Hitchcockian. Grasso's evocation of the 1963 horror classic "The Birds" is no accident.

Is any of this real? It's hard to tell for sure. (See "The story behind the work.") Like "Polair," "Les Oiseaux" has a sci-fi feel. Both works are strange enough to inspire a touch of dread, but ordinary-looking enough to beguile the viewer into a state of relaxation just this side of boredom. Like a dream world furnished with the familiar but inhabited by a foreign presence, the Rome and Berlin of Grasso's art are places of uncertainty, doubt and fear.

You may not want to live in either one, but as Grasso shows you, they're not bad places to visit.

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BLACK BOX: LAURENT GRASSO

Through July 24 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza).

202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285).

www.hirshhorn.si.edu

Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission: Free.

The story behind the work

A painter, sculptor, draftsman and video artist — whose work includes the 2009 design and construction of a temporary working restaurant inside a glass box on the roof of Paris's Palais de Tokyo art space — Laurent Grasso refers to himself as a maker of "fictions." There's a little truth to that, but only a little.

The swooping birds seen in "Les Oiseaux" are real starlings, known for their bizarre swarming behavior in which they wheel insanely through the sky at dusk, just before settling in to roost for the night. And that cloud of haunted pollen — or whatever it's meant to be — in "Polair" is a digital fabrication, an animation created by Grasso to look just plausible enough.

The two videos reveal both extremes of the artist's wide-ranging interests, which run from, as he puts it, unreal things that look real to real things that look fake.

— Michael O'Sullivan