

When reality blurs into fiction

BY MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

Experimental filmmaker Chris Chong Chan Fui's short film "Block B," on view in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's Black Box theater, has been described as a "living painting," but it works on terms any film buff can understand. The camera may be static — focused unblinkingly, like a surveillance camera, across the central courtyard of four high-rise apartment buildings on a wall of balconies, walkways and a stairwell — but it has dialogue, action, drama and suspense.

Admittedly, not very much of them.

The 20-minute movie is structured in two halves, one set at night, the other in daytime. Visually, its subject is the building itself, home to Indian contract workers and their families in Malaysia. Although we can just make out the inhabitants,

Maybe, just maybe, the folks whose lives we're watching are really actors.

they're like anonymous ants in an anthill, seen from a great distance scurrying up and down stairs, hanging a freshly washed sari out to dry, or riding a tricycle back and forth.

The subtitled Hindi dialogue is sparse and scattered, a few lines of overheard conversation seemingly picked up by a hidden microphone. The action consists of firecrackers, set off by a bunch of children during the holiday of deepavali (also known as the Festival of Lights). Drama comes courtesy of a teenage couple, caught making out in one of the stairwell windows. Suspense consists of watching a wet bedsheet slip off the railing on one of the upper floors, only to be caught on a lower one.

It is, to put it bluntly, kind of boring.

There is, however, something subtler going on here than what takes place on-screen. Is it, as it at first appears, a hidden-camera documentary, with conversations recorded between real people? And if so, how should we feel about eavesdropping on private conversations, peeping, like stalkers with binoculars and bugged stairwells, from our hidden perch across the way?

But maybe, just maybe, the folks whose lives we're watching, seemingly voyeuristically, are really actors following a script. Could the filmmaker have hired them to play "laundry woman 1," "girlfriend" and "school boy 3"? There's an online press kit that includes a cast list.

There are suggestions that "Block B" — shot on 35mm film, like a Hollywood movie, but using only natural light — is some new hybrid of the two genres. That the deadpan footage may be real but that the dialogue has been added after the fact. The



CHRIS CHONG CHAN FUI

A still from Chris Chong Chan Fui's "Block B," a voyeuristic look at people at an apartment complex in Malaysia.

exhibition wall text refers to the conversations as a "voiceover." And the production notes include a credit for a sound designer (Yasuhiro Morinaga).

Such ambiguity is part of the artist's point. Other themes include the tension between the organic and the man-made, the dynamic and the immovable, inside and out, us and them. But while "Block B" plays like the neorealist films of the 1940s and 1950s, it's closer to conceptual or performance art. Slipperier questions of what's real, what's fake and how much of each goes into all the art we look at, read or watch — especially the kind we consume at home with a remote in our hands — make "Block B" a compellingly subversive episode of reality TV.

"I treated it like a documentary," Chong has said, "but with a little hand of fiction."

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BLACK BOX: CHRIS CHONG CHAN FUI

Through Aug. 1 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

How did Chris Chong Chan Fui come to cast the star of "Block B"? The Malaysian filmmaker used to live there.

Located in Brickfields, a neighborhood outside Kuala Lumpur known as Little India for its concentration of Indian immigrants, the building (which contains a swimming pool, just outside the bottom frame) is home to many Indian architects, engineers and IT specialists working in the country on temporary contracts of two to four years. In a

country with a fair amount of discrimination toward ethnically Indian Malaysians, it is a kind of self-contained world.

It's a world Chong evokes with spare brushstrokes. Snippets of conversation allude to life in transit. Listen carefully, and in the background you can hear a distant Islamic call to prayer, even as within the building compound itself residents perform the pooja, a Hindu prayer ritual.

— Michael O'Sullivan



Chris Chong Chan Fui used to live in the complex at the center of "Block B."

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