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Recreation of the set for Stephane's room from *The Science of Sleep*



Recreation of the TV studio set from *The Science of Sleep*



Projection of actor Gael García Bernal's face

DREAM FACTORY

by Ben Davis

Michel Gondry, "The Science of Sleep: An Exhibition of Sculpture and Pathological Creepy Little Gifts," Sept. 6-Sept. 30, 2006, at Deitch Projects, 76 Grand Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

Most movies have to wait until they achieve mega-blockbuster status to get their own theme park ride. Michel Gondry's new movie, *The Science of Sleep*, which opens on Sept. 22, 2006, gets the treatment in advance, in the form of a fun-house-like exhibition at Deitch Projects in SoHo.

A French-born New Yorker, Gondry (b. 1963) comes to the art world with a substantial commercial mystique, thanks to a handful of epoch-making MTV videos for hipster icons like Björk, the Chemical Brothers and the White Stripes (for my money, some of the most viscerally entertaining video art out there), and his beloved 2004 feature film, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which successfully translated his witty plays with frames of reference into a full-length narrative with emotional depth.

His latest film, *The Science of Sleep*, tells the tale of a young man, Stephane, played by Mexican heartthrob Gael García Bernal, who attempts to woo a neighbor with whimsical inventions while coping with the fact that he often confuses his dreams with reality. This conceit serves as a launching pad for wall-to-wall visual craziness, and the Deitch exhibition attempts to capture the spirit of the film's dreamy mise-en-scène.

One gallery contains a recreation of Stephane's room from the film, jam-packed with nostalgic clutter and complete with a light-switch-flipping system employing a hammer, ropes and pulleys that can only be described as Pee-Wee's Playhouse-ian. Nearby, one can gaze through a peephole in a door and glimpse looped images of point-of-view shots from the film in which the characters spy on one another through their own doors.

Another gallery has a recreation of a cardboard TV set that Stephane dreams up in the film, broadcasting an imaginary show where he "cooks up" dreams on a kitchen set complete with stove. Nearby is a large video screen with a close-up of García Bernal's face, attached to more ropes and pulleys. Pull the rope on the right, and the actor's eye blinks open. Pull the rope on the left, and his other eye does the same. Pull both ropes and you can make him bat both at once.

Other rooms feature props from the movie: 12 naïf paintings of disasters that Stephane dreams up for a calendar (a real version of this calendar is available for \$30 at the gallery desk); a piano that, in the film, plays a key role in the meeting of the young man and his love interest, inset with a screen playing a loop of the relevant scene; a miniature city made out of cardboard toilet-paper tubes, one of Stephane's flights of fancy; and a life-sized sculpture of García Bernal with donkey ears and massive hands (in the movie, Stephane sprouts the awkward mitts when he becomes enraged), among other things.



Diorama of cardboard city, alongside video of a scene from the film (right) and a display of Michel Gondry's old tax returns



Life-size statue of Gael García Bernal's character from *The Science of Sleep*



Display of Michel Gondry's "pathological creepy little gift" for Dorothy Barrick

Those saving themselves for the film needn't worry -- minus the interactive fun, few of the memorable images in the Deitch show can't already be found online in the *Sleep* [trailer](#). In fact, while the discontinuous, free-wheeling juxtapositions of projections, constructions and movie sets in the Deitch Projects galleries may be meant to evoke the rambling logic of dreams, the whole business more accurately incarnates the choppy montage of a movie preview, and certainly stands in need of the movie to make sense of it all.

At the same time, in the exhibition, Gondry does attempt to blur the line between dream and reality still more, adding a typically artistic vein of self-reference. The film's whimsical, gadget-loving Stephane is clearly meant as an analogue for Gondry himself -- Stephane's job at a calendar company is based on a job that the film director once held. And Gondry includes elements in the art installation that blur the line between his fictional creations and his own real life, including, for instance, a wall of tax returns from his cash-strapped Paris days, tacked up alongside the cardboard city.

Most memorably, this personal side of the show yields the pink-carpeted gallery of "pathological creepy little gifts." In the world of the film, Stephane tries to win love via his goofy and imaginative inventions, a habit that Gondry would like you to know that he shares. The gallery features four wall-mounted glass display cases, each marked with the name and glowing light-box photo of one of the special ladies in Gondry's life. There is, for instance, a display of offerings he crafted for one Karen Baird (costume designer for many of the director's endeavors), including a cutesy set of baby-Ts, an LP in a cover titled "KB's song" and a necklace he made for her of his own fingernail clippings.

For an artist whose theme is a spontaneous, childlike creativity and an out-of-control imagination, everything here feels fairly calculated and mannered. (In the vitrine dedicated to another of Gondry's crushes, Kishu Chand, there's a piece of metal bent into a U shape with the picture of an eye and the word "MUCH" sewed into it; it's titled "Eye-Steel Like U-Sew Much.") The installation is more of a self-conscious romanticization of the idea of spontaneous genius than the real deal -- much as the way-cool dream effects of Gondry's movie are a little too aware that they are way-cool to seem really dream-like.

The nice thing about Gondry's installation is its open populism and lack of pretension. It doesn't pretend that it exists on another, more rarified plane than most mass culture. It treats gallery art, advertisements and movies as one big rainbow, of which it is a happy piece. Of course, there's no such a thing as a harmonious spectrum of media -- there's always competition and interference among their different rhythms and capacities, and, in the case of the Deitch show, it is very clear that the high-concept Hollywood dream machine is playing the hegemonic role (though Gondry certainly deserves recognition for his own quirky vision within it.)

In a way, though, you can think of this as a provocation more radical than the most avant-garde Duchampian "fuck you." The latter strategy involves doing something unacceptable, thus at least showing enough respect for art world expectations to try and subvert them. Gondry's installation, on the other hand, doesn't bother to either prop up or subvert high culture conventions. Like the character in the film with his dreams, Gondry just fades back and forth into the art world without seeming to notice -- as if it weren't even such a big deal in the first place.

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Gifts created by Michel Gondry for Karen Baird



Gift created by Michel Gondry for Kishu Chand



Workers at Deitch Projects putting together Michel Gondry's "The Science of Sleep" installation, Sept. 7, 2006