

## Slammed at Sundance

Vanessa Beecroft had better prepare for some serious damage control, since director Pietra Brettkelly's documentary on Beecroft, *The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins*, opens at Sundance tonight. The doc<sup>1</sup> cluster-bombs<sup>2</sup> her faddish<sup>3</sup> fascination with Sudanese orphans and paints Beecroft as a hypocritically self-aware, colossally colonial porno narcissist. The film is brutally effective because it lets Beecroft hang herself with damaging quotes and appalling behavior.

The documentary explores Beecroft's experiment in Sudan, in which she attempts to adopt two Sudanese orphans and use them as subjects in her work. Wise to theory, Beecroft says her adoption will be 'not just fetishization of the blacks. It will be a beginning of a relationship with that country.' The film documents the significant gap between Beecroft's theory and her actions.

Upon her arrival in the Sudan, Beecroft hurries to set up a photo shoot, hiding the cameras from the orphanage's sisters, calling the babies 'these poor creatures.' Which baby should she photograph? 'Either one or the other,' she says, 'it doesn't matter.'

Repeatedly, Beecroft claims that she 'loves this culture' – but, in the film's most disturbing scene, sisters from the orphanage try to stop her from stripping the children nude inside their abbey for an elaborate photo shoot. Beecroft refuses, complains, starts shooting again, and eventually loses a physical confrontation with one of the sisters, who takes the children away from her, furious that Beecroft is stripping children naked inside a church. 'Christ, these people,' Beecroft moans, as she barricades herself inside, pushing a pew<sup>4</sup> up against the door to keep the sisters out of their own abbey.

'My husband says, "You are so superficial";' Beecroft admits. But Greg Durkin, a social anthropologist, says much worse in the film – in part because Beecroft spends months attempting to adopt these two children without informing him. (When she finds that she needs to have his approval, she considers a divorce.) He notes that Angelina Jolie's and Madonna's adoptions rated them 'a lot of press and publicity... Vanessa's always been very receptive to that.' Beecroft blithely<sup>5</sup> agrees, noting that she's always been obsessed with 'the romance' of celebrity magazines.

When Beecroft finally installs her final work, *VB61 Still Death Darfur Still Deaf*, it's the standard Beecroft hokum<sup>6</sup>: mostly-nude women in a public place, only this time they're painted pitch black and covered with buckets of fake blood (get it?). Intended to disturb, it mostly provokes giggles from gawking<sup>7</sup> tourists, but Brettkelly films the performance like something in a David Fincher film. Beecroft stands over the bodies, with red liquid dripping from her hands and splattered all over her feet – a murderer at the scene of a crime.

'Is it difficult to work with 30 black women?' a spectator asks. 'Yes,' Beecroft replies. 'It is very stressful.'

Logan Hill, nymag.com, January 18, 2008

1. **doc**: documentary.
2. **cluster-bombs**: (fig.) attacks.
3. **faddish**: fashionable.
4. **pew**: bench.
5. **blithely**: without care.
6. **hokum**: nonsense.
7. **gawking**: staring.

## ► Understanding the text

### 1 Answer these questions.

1. Which event is the article actually reporting on?
2. What does it say about it?
3. In what way is the film 'brutally effective'?

4. What does Beecroft say her planned adoption will not be?
5. And what does she claim to love?
6. Why does Beecroft become frustrated with one of the sisters?
7. What does Beecroft's husband think of her?
8. What is Beecroft 'receptive' to and what is she obsessed with?

## **Beyond the text**

- 2** What image are we left with of Beecroft herself? What type of person do you imagine her to be?
- 3** What is Beecroft's perception of celebrity? Do you have the impression she is interested in it?