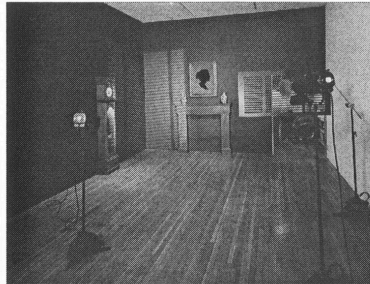
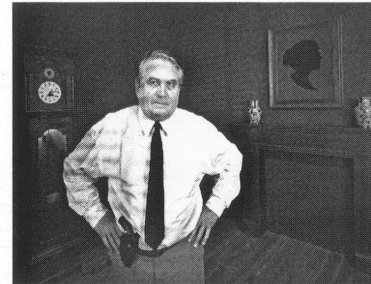


Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation view, 2004.  
Photo: Jim Breukelman.



Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation view, 2004.  
Photo: Jim Breukelman.



Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, 2004. Photo: Jim Breukelman.

enthusiastic about jazz, for instance, as he is keen on film noir, hence the addition of Plimley's improvisations. The artist's longstanding fascination with Lacanian sexual symbolism is made manifest in Waldo's fetishistic gift vases, while the silhouette that greets the viewer is almost certainly an ironic reflection on the provocative psychiatrist's mirror image theory. The psychiatrist's belief is that the self is first discovered via visual self-recognition (the painting in the film was frontal, realistic and executed in swirling oils).

Having provided a "feminine" context for *Laura* via "romantic narration," Metcalfe then decided to masculinize Laura's filmic apartment suite by employing "masculine" colours and materials. Laura, in other words, is turned into a female subject in a masculine mind. All of which suggests a great deal of control, of course. The kind of control that *auteurish* directors used to exercise over their sets. The kind of control that is exercised here.

Mark Harris  
15/04/04

## Eric Metcalfe

**Laura**  
April 24 to May 29, 2004

Information about this exhibition is available  
on-line at [www.artspeak.ca](http://www.artspeak.ca)

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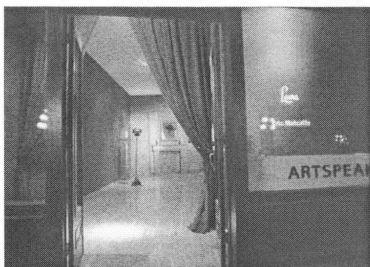
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*Laura-Lie*

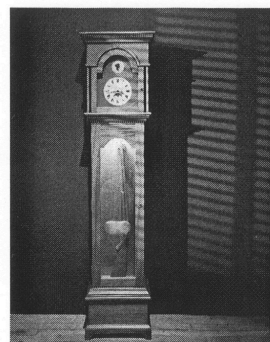


Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation view, 2004.  
Photo: Jenn Laing.

## Laura-Lie

Vancouver is a West Coast movie town, even though onscreen, Canada's chameleon city usually pretends to be some place else: Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, even the Bronx, anywhere, in fact, except southern B.C.. This geographical alienation, like so many other layers of meaning, is very much present in Eric Metcalfe's *Laura* project, recently assembled in Gastown's Artspeak Gallery. Based on Vera Caspary's 1942 novel and the 20th Century Fox film of the same name released two years later, it harks back to the days when New York was almost always represented by a Burbank-built Potemkin village. Before Vancouver pretended to be Seattle, Los Angeles aped Manhattan, perhaps the earliest known instance of bicoastal deracination.

As all admirers of director Otto Preminger's famed dark thriller already know, *Laura* is fairly clogged with exquisite bric-à-brac. The film was made at the beginning of the noir era, before the full impact of the Second World War had pushed this evocative style into studies of societal corruption and personal damnation that pre-war audiences could never have imagined. This elegant adaptation of a best-selling novel is singularly free of mean streets, private eyes, femmes fatales, and most of the other dark stars in Nighttown's firmament. Instead, it unfolds almost exclusively in two tony apartments: that of Laura Hunt, a beautiful



Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation detail, 2004.  
Photo: Jim Breukelman.

advertising executive whom everyone wrongly assumes has been murdered by a buckshot blast to the face, and that of Waldo Lydecker, an acerbic and sexually unattractive journalist who tries to fill the emptiness of his existence with antiquarian treasures. Into this unfamiliar world steps Mark McPherson, a baseball-loving homicide detective with a silver tibia. The latter addition/subtraction is the end result of a bloody shootout with a tommygun-wielding thug. It is an expensive prosthesis that confirms the hero's masculine bona fides even as it explains why he, unlike most men of his generation, is not in uniform. It is also symbolic of the flatfoot's perverse passion for a beautiful woman he believes to be deceased.

Begun by director Rouben Mamoulian, who subsequently claimed to have shot at least seventy-five percent of the picture, *Laura* was completed by Otto Preminger; the film's producer and one of studio head Darryl F. Zanuck's least favourite people. That Preminger was permitted to assume the reins of command gives some indication of just how dissatisfied the mogul must have been with Mamoulian's rushes. If film has always been a collaborative art, that was particularly the case in Hollywood, where directors were rarely allowed to pen their own screenplays. Nevertheless, against the odds, a number of independent minded



Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation detail, 2004.  
Photo: Jenn Laing.

filmmakers were able to impose their imprint on even the least sympathetic material and they would subsequently be celebrated by the critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* as *auteurs*. *Auteurs* were authors who shaped screenplays even if they didn't take formal writing credit, who were involved in every aspect of a motion picture's production up to – and sometimes even including – exhibition. They were the exact opposite of the artisanal professionals whom François Truffaut dismissed as "the gentlemen who add the pictures," being artists who wrote movies the way that novelists wrote novels, with the aid of Alexandre Astruc's Platonic *caméra stylo* [camera-pen].

Not so coincidentally, the *auteur* factor is as central to Metcalfe's *Laura* as it was to Preminger's. With the budget provided by the Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award he received in 2000, Metcalfe put together a team to give birth to his brainchild. Ideas were bandied about during a number of pre-construction meetings for all the world like the conference table confabulations common to Hollywood during an upcoming feature's development process. Tasks were delegated, but overall control was never lost.

Thus, Paul Plimley, Vancouver's acclaimed avant-garde jazz pianist, was asked to provide the music



Eric Metcalfe, *Laura*, installation detail, 2004.  
Photo: Jim Breukelman.

for the piece, improvising a de facto score that consists of free-flowing variations of David Raksin's famous theme. The voice over commentary, a form of dialogue that is native to film noir, was delivered by Nancy Shaw in a series of imaginary wartime letters to the dead/undead Miss Hunt. These looped epistles focus primarily on gender identity in times of crisis, as befits a subject who is reimagined as a tantalizing object of desire in one masculine mind after another: The tape was edited by Michael Turner and endowed with deliberately anachronistic Foley effects by sound artist Peter Courtemanche.

The set itself – a fireplace, over which loom a semi-abstract cameo profile of a 19th century beauty and two ornate vases; a grandfather clock with an encased shotgun; and Venetian blind shadows – stands bracketed between klieg lights, a gobo that could easily be mistaken for Waldo's beloved antique fire screen, speakers, mahogany wood finishing and country club green walls. Most of these constructions were completed by sculptor Rick Ross and ceramicist Gillian McMillan. As for Artspeak itself, well, that's the studio, isn't it?

A self-confessed *Laura* addict, Metcalfe deliberately tried to keep the clutter to a minimum while still including most of his favourite things. He is as

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