

'A distortion or a disease or an abnormality always makes something start happening in the brain. It's really interesting.'

MARCH
2007

Future Greats

25 artists you need to know

words J.J. CHARLESWORTH



Karen

Stills from *Insiders*, 2006, video, 75 min.
Courtesy the artist and One in the Other, London

Russo

IF YOU COULD SHINE DARKNESS FROM A TORCH, you might be some way to describing the work of Karen Russo. In her drawings, paintings, video installations and semi-fictional documentaries, Russo's explorations of the darker side of human experience open onto scenes of occult happenings, subterranean spaces, uncontrollable impulses, criminality and the ambiguous moral status of the artist in modern culture. The Israeli-born artist, who relocated to London two years ago, has long been fascinated by how society projects everything it finds abnormal, excessive and intolerable into a whole universe of images and archetypes that recur, almost compulsively, throughout our culture.

They're themes that criss-cross and interlink, building up a powerful and all-encompassing worldview that doesn't make concessions to those who want art to be easy on the eye, or on the mind. In the video *The Point of Departure* (2006) [see Martin Herbert's review in this issue] Russo draws us from the classical space of a nineteenth-century museum into the tunnels and catacombs of the Paris sewers, on a bizarre journey into a shadowy parallel domain, the "negative mirror image" as she calls it, of the civilised world above. If the sewer is the subconscious, rotten underside of the city, then the criminal is the negative of the civilised individual, an opposition she explores in the video *Insiders* (2006), where both prisoners who make art and "professional" artists – faces silhouetted in anonymity – talk of the motivations and desires that drive them to produce. Russo questions how ideas of madness and obsession lie behind our image of both criminals and artists. Such archetypes, Russo suggests, say more about how our culture contains difficult or unmanageable impulses than it does about the artists or criminals themselves, the lasting influence of Romantic thinking about art.

Russo's complex, often unsettling themes and her against-the-grain approach to what art should be for, and how artists might be understood, have won her a small but growing public. From her studio in East London, she's now researching a new documentary on William Lyttle, the "mole man" of Hackney, who has spent the last four decades burrowing a network of tunnels and caves from under his suburban house. Russo enthuses how she "was amazed to discover the great similarities between Lyttle's thinking and that of the average artist, creating things that don't work or don't have a functional value, the zen-like work process and the obsession involved in the making". Creativity turned to perverse, obsessive uses, or obsession and a desire for excess as the drivers of creativity? Is Russo the authentic dark, romantic artist, or just playing the part? Or do we look for such a character as a projection of what we would prefer to hide from ourselves?