

## Nick and Sheila Pye



4/7/09  
By Kriston Capps

Washington D.C. The young career of Nick and Sheila Pye has spanned video, performance, installation and photography, incorporating such tried-and-true genres as still-life and portraiture, and the narrative structures of filmmaking. In their new exhibition “Vanitas,” the married artists explore facets of their own relationship in an 11-minute video (2007) and six related photographs (2008).

In the video, *Loudly, Death Unties*, the third part of a trilogy, the artists play characters who might be isolated siblings or frustrated lovers; they find themselves in a cabinlike lodge that bears some similarity to the elaborate, shabby-chic sets used for the previous installments, *The Paper Wall* (2004) and *A Life of Errors* (2006). Here the pair must grapple with the unfortunate event of the woman’s death and departure from the mortal plane, signaled by the appearance of a banshee (played by a small girl) and symbolized through various interactions. The woman—Sheila—begins to float toward the ceiling, prompting Nick’s character to grab her by the legs and secure her to a chair with a rope. When the two give up the metaphoric fight to keep her anchored on the side of the living, Nick delicately places two fingers under the leg of a prone Sheila and slowly lifts her as if in a game of “light as a feather, stiff as a board”—a perfect encapsulation of the Canadian artists’ dark, twee sensibility.

The photographs complement the video with more self-serious and pedigreed death imagery. Highlights of the show included a memento mori still life enhanced by chiaroscuro and digital manipulation as well as a pair of tonally contrasting portraits, in which Nick is caked in ghostly makeup and bathed in white light while Sheila is covered in soot and pictured darkly. The video’s portrayal of death is as accessible as it is fantastical. In consummate collaboration, the Pyes have provided an unfolding portrait of their marriage in occasionally confrontational physical interactions that have seen the artists share spit, urine, hair and fingernails. Death, then, is a natural subject for them: it is the only thing that guarantees to do them part.

Above: *Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007, video, 11 minutes;