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NEW YORK THE SUM



THEATER

Revenge of the Greeks



A THOUSAND SHIPS COME HOME 'Lines in the Sand' at the Kitchen.

WERNER MACHMAN

By HELEN SHAW

Rumor has it that Dick Cheney likes to quote fifth-century Athenian generals, using ancient battle strategies as the precedent for preemption. This month, the classics strike back.

Two downtown multimedia artists employ stories of the Trojan War to lodge complaints against the Bush Administration, with wildly diverging results. At the Kitchen, Joan Jonas stages glimpses of Helen of Troy, masking an anti-war cynicism with a surfeit of images. At LaMaMa, Theodora Skipitares makes a more explicit plea for the soldiers' return in a clumsy retelling of the Odyssey.

Joan Jonas was heralded as a multimedia performance pioneer in the 1960s and 1970s. New York hasn't seen one of her performances in 10 years, but her austere stage pictures and dense structures still dazzle. "Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt" is an assemblage of H.D.'s poem "Helen in Egypt" with other texts — both found and of Ms. Jonas's devising.

The packed 45 minutes outline a mythical hypothesis: Aphrodite, on the eve of the Trojan War, smuggles the real Helen off to Egypt, leaving a Helen-shaped cloud in her place. Only after the Greeks sail for home is the human woman discovered. Thus a decade of war was fought over a phantom.

The show begins with two elegant donkey people calmly regarding a man lying in raked sand. We watch him, too — a video image of his torso repeats infinitely on a screen beyond him. Once he rises, Jonas enters ringing a bell to read the first of several dislocated texts. A man builds a wall out of concrete brick, Jonas draws shapes in chalk and sand, the pyramids of Egypt and Las Vegas march across various screens.

Helen and Aphrodite walk in and out of the projections, moving with jangled ritualized movements. Doubles are everywhere, inverted on screens or in the depths of a crystal ball. The video that re-projects these images does a strange alchemy — bodies seem to go transparent or to fly. The visions threat-

en, but with all the detachment of a dream. This production demands a lot of the audience, but it meets it at every level — from the polished video design of Astrid Klein to Stephen Vitiello's hypnotic musical compositions.

Bravo to the Kitchen for calling a great New York artist home at last: Helen may have been a figment, but Joan Jonas is the real thing.

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"Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt" at the Kitchen until February 28 (512 West 19th Street, between Tenth Avenue and West Side Highway, 212-255-5793).