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Mesmerized by two strangers

As human dramas go, Kelly Nipper's video installation "An Arrangement for the Architect and a Darkroom Timer" at MC (a new incarnation of the Project) could hardly be simpler: two young actors, a man and a woman, stand face to face against a solid orange backdrop, just about kissing distance, for an hour. The camera observes them in a single unmoving shot from a fixed position a few feet away. The resulting footage is projected life size and in duplicate, side by side though out of sync, allowing viewers to follow the action at two points simultaneously.

Drama it is, however — and thoroughly mesmerizing. The actors were apparently strangers before their appearance, and their subtle interaction over the course of this extremely uncomfortable hour reads like a love story reduced to its essence.

They're an unlikely couple, and the dynamic between them is remarkably mercurial, shifting from moment to moment between flirtation, boredom, intimidation, sarcasm, irritation, affection and fatigue.

In the absence of any real action, the smallest movements assume an almost operatic significance. The flicker of a smile on her lips lights up the screen; the crossing of his arms initiates a bullying power play. Because they never actually touch, the narrow space between them remains thrillingly charged throughout.

A third projection, on a nearby wall, portrays a red apple against a pink backdrop. Over the course of a nine-minute loop, the apple splits neatly into two, each half rolling cleanly away from the other, then magically rejoins. It is a clever companion image, abstracting the already minimalist scenario one step further.

It takes a particular combination of grace and audacity to rest such a large work on such slender conceptual legs, but Nipper gets the balance just right, revealing, in this basic interaction, a psychological equivalent of Blake's "world in a blade of grass."

MC, 6086 Comey Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 939-3777, through June 25. Closed Sunday

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