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Michael Robinson's "The Dark, Krystle" in Chicago

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A still from Michael Robinson's "The Dark, Krystle," 2013.

(Courtesy the artist and Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago)

The work of **Michael Robinson** is difficult to explain but easy to understand. There doesn't appear to be a unified theme to his work, which makes it hard to discuss what kind of filmmaker he is or what his lineage might be. To put it another way, he's not easily categorizable, which is a good thing. But there is a feeling that permeates his videos, an emotional melancholy oscillating between light and dark, that is instantly recognizable.

One branch of the bulk of Robinson's films — including his latest, "The Dark, Krystle" (2013), on view through March 15 at the Carrie Secrist Gallery in Chicago — are composed of footage from our not-too-distant past, a hazy collage of sitcoms, commercials, and instructional videos. These pop artifacts are not repurposed for mockery, as in a supercut, but are used to highlight malevolent energies buried within popular images, like a J.G. Ballard novel come to life. Under the shiny veneer of mass produced images, something evil lurks.

Robinson's films are best watched with little prior knowledge of his work. My first encounter with his distinctive visual language was in a video he made called "Light is Waiting," which turns the ABC sitcom "Full House" — specifically a ridiculous, but startling moment on the show involving two children and a television set — into a house of hallucinogenic horrors. Robinson transforms the images, folding them into one another, slowing them down, letting the trails of color and light linger across the screen.

"The Dark, Krystle" features footage of vampy icons Linda Evans and Joan Collins from the 1980s soap "Dynasty," and Robinson creates a rhythmic poem out of their theatricality — dramatic breakdowns, nasty glares, forceful drinking — letting them play out in repetition, the result a hypnotic conversation between these two figures. As the film progresses and the melodrama ascends, a tragic narrative develops, albeit obscurely. Is this a battle of good versus evil? Or does the shift from one character to the other represent a transformation, the result of a Faustian bargain?

Robinson, who was part of the 2012 Whitney Biennial (where we interviewed him), has screened work at the New York Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Migrating Forms, and more.