

Who is Lucy Palustris? Patricia Coates posits this character as her alter ego in her performance and film works. “Palustris” means “swampy” or “marshy” in Latin, and indeed some of Coates’s most striking works take place in the vicinity of the swamp. I looked up the word: a low-lying wetland, often in proximity to a river, and in a landscape dominated by trees.

This is the landscape of Coates’ 2017 film *Lucy Palustris*. The film opens with a sign advising, “Warning Do Not Enter.” Warning aside, we are immediately drawn in to this setting that is mundane yet bristling with near-apocalyptic portents. Coates, as Lucy, appears in the distance, walking through a field, wearing an incongruous red party dress—Prada, I’m told. This warrior in a potential ecological catastrophe zone—Coates anchors her work in ecological concerns, though it escapes relentlessly into “fantasy”—is attired throughout in a series of luxe party dresses, a get-up seemingly at odds with the physical situation and her activities. In the longest single sequence, unfolding in real time, Palustris polishes silverware. Hardly an “outdoorsy” pastime, but rather one that evokes days-gone-by feminine domesticity. At one point, she starts humming “Dream a Little Dream of Me”:

Sweet dreams, till sunbeams find you
Gotta keep dreaming leave all worries behind you
But in your dreams whatever they be
You gotta make me a promise, promise to me
You'll dream, dream a little of me

Is this the “little missus” of fifties home life, the dutiful wife, Beaver Cleaver’s mom? Action, setting, and persona don’t add up in a conventional manner. At one point, Palustris unpacks a bubble-wrapped basin, and removes a dead frog, which she places on a silver platter. *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*? The suggestion that this is lunch is not further explored. This is a surreal rent, a kind of violence, embedded within the film’s methodical exposition. The suggestion of impending or barely suppressed violence recurs later, as Palustris polishes a rifle, or when she takes an axe and strikes—only once—a tree.

“Lucy Palustris” can be seen as a filmic meditation on the landscape genre. This landscape is very quiet, very still, but it’s hardly untroubled. Palustris is a character from a contemporary pastoral. The genre of pastoral is often a poetic means for the exploration of melancholy, even morbid themes. The Arcadia of pastoral poetry and painting is very often a paradise lost, as in two paintings of Nicolas Poussin, both titled “*Et in Arcadia Ego*”. I, too, was in Arcadia. In one of them, that “I” is a skull.

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