

MODERN PAINTERS

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THEDA

GEORGINA STARR

LONDON

PRINCE CHARLES CINEMA

Silent film star Theda Bara appeared in over 40 films but is remembered today for still images of her hamming it up as a kohl-eyed Cleopatra. In a 40-minute black-and-white film, *Theda*, British artist Georgina Starr, best known for her series of works inspired by the 1965 thriller *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, pays tribute to this stormiest of divas and undertakes an archeology of the gestural act of the silent-era actress, drawing on the styles of several other now-forgotten grandes dames, such as Barbara La Marr and Maud Allen.

Divided into three parts, “prelude,” “act,” and “epilogue,” the film’s middle section is a larky narrative about an ingénue who poses for a louche moustache-twirling sculpture. Starr plays all the parts, most strikingly a cat burglar modeled on enigmatic French star Musidora.

But the “prelude” is the real coup; on a long single take. Starr runs through the codified expressive repertoire of the Theda-Era performer with such precision that any ironic distance evaporates. The poster for *Theda* shows a séance, and indeed Starr makes herself the medium. Through her playful, tender homage, the silent goddesses speak again.

- JONATHAN ROMNEY

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