ART REVIEW

Images Shimmer Upon Screens,

By ROBERTA SMITH

Installation pieces involving moving images, whether film or video, are prominent among art's current staples, and the number of women pursuing the medium is on the rise. So it barely bends the law of averages to find two such installations at the Whitney Museum of American Art: "Swoon" by Janine Antoni and "Blind Side" by Lisa Roberts. And it's not so much being that they play off each other in revealing ways.

Ms. Antoni's work has been performance-oriented, usually hammering home points about "women's work" and various female compulsions, especially those to be clean, thin and well turned out. She also often puns on male-dominated art styles. In "Gnaw," she lampooned Minimalist perfection and dramatized various cravings with a man-size cube of chocolate, a substance thought to be a female aphrodisiac, that was noticeably chewed around the edges.

She has made drawings by fluttering her mascara-laden lashes across sheets of paper. And in an especially well-known performance piece, she scrubbed the floor with her own hair dipped in black dye, creating a kind of cleaning-day Pollock.

But as with nearly every performance artist before her, Ms. Antoni may have grown weary of putting her body on the line and realized that she had to move on. "Swoon" is her first large work in which the viewer does not see or sense the artist's physical involvement, and it represents a big, largely successful step.

Originally seen last summer at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, "Swoon" pursues the familiar theme of beauty and its cost, but it abandons the domestic realm to concentrate on art, specifically ballet.

In Janine Antoni's "Swoon," the viewer sees dancers' feet on one side.

The viewer enters the piece through a darkened ravi finished corridor accompanied by strange, slightly disturbing sounds: heavy breathing, straining grunts and light thuds that can make one think of sex or sports.

Inside, in a darkened gallery, the source of these sounds is revealed. Beneath a beautiful red velvet curtain that is lowered almost to the ground, the bottom of a glowing screen is visible, and on it are the dancing feet of a ballerina and her partner. As they proceed through their steps, turns and lifts unaccompanied by music, her toe shoes make sharp little thuds, the stays of her costume creak, and the dancers' breath becomes increasingly labored.

In all, it's an audible account of the work, discipline and suffering behind ballet's breathtaking illusion. The image is doubled by a wall-size mirror opposite the screen, so that the viewer's shadowy reflection becomes part of the image, adding another layer of reality.

One can walk around the screen to view its "backstage" side, where the dancers are fully visible, along with the installation's inner workings: the projection booth and video tracking numbers on the screen. Yet more in the way of beauty, narrative and emotion is also conveyed: the ballerina's white feathered costume suggests "Swan Lake"; the dancers are performing the ballet's famously sad, seductive final pas de deux, in which the lovers repeatedly seem overwhelmed by feeling.

Suddenly, Tchaikovsky's music for the ballet fills the gallery, masking the sounds of effort, lifting dancer and viewer alike, making one feel slightly swoonish. But the music lasts only a few exhilarating moments before the sounds of reality take over again.

Nothing quite so dramatic happens in Ms. Roberts's "Blind Side," a Structuralist effort that also uses a two-sided screen and a mirror. In this case, a film of a well-appointed salon — complete with formal an-
Installed in the Imagination

Photographs from the Whitney Museum of American Art

... While their entire figures are visible on the other side of the screen.

tique furniture and oriental rugs and punctuated by three big French windows — is projected through a translucent glass screen and reflected on a wall-size mirror on the opposite end of the gallery. Entering this gallery, viewers are thus sandwiched between mirroring life-size images, one that reflects them, one that doesn't.

The camera never moves, but the scene changes; the light outside moves from day to night and back again, in a 24-hour exposure accelerated to less than 6 minutes. As the sky darkens, the room disappears and only the windows remain, luminous rectangles through which a busy city comes into sharper focus: the lights of buildings, streets and cars speeding across an elevated highway emphasize a fast, gritty urban world far removed from the quiet unchanging formality of the room itself.

This piece is a considerable improvement over Ms. Roberts's debut last year at the Lehman Maupin Gallery in SoHo, a pointlessly busy installation involving images of statues. "Blind Side" has economy and understatement in its favor, although it may be almost too stripped down.

It seems to make deliberate reference to one of the landmarks of Structuralist film, Michael Snow's "Wavelength" of 1967. In this movie, the scene is a TriBeCa loft; the action consists of the camera's executing a 45-minute zoom slowly and inexorably toward the center point of a three-windowed wall. The light changes into a series of lurid Warholian colors (achieved with filters); the sounds of unseen street traffic intrude. Just as the camera seems about to hit the wall, the zoom shot comes to an end, centimeters from a postcard-size image of the ocean.

It is almost as if Ms. Roberts set out to rearrange the components of Mr. Snow's film: in her work the light, and its changes, are natural; the traffic is visible, the grungy loft, an industrial space redolent of old-style manufacturing, has been traded for a more genteel but equally old-fashioned setting, one whose stillness contrasts with the industrious scene outside. As day turns to night and the room fades into total darkness (like a theater), the three windows come to resemble narrow movie screens and the racing traffic the movement of film through the projector.

"Blind Side" might almost be said to out-structure the structuralism of "Wavelength." Ms. Roberts touches on the basics of film — time, light and movement — using reality in a more straightforward manner, and she tolerates even less narrative than Mr. Snow, who teasingly created a fragment of traditional suspense by having a couple walk past the camera talking about finding a corpse in the loft. The only figures in "Blind Side" are the shadows and reflections of the viewers (an effect, however, that evokes the work of one of Mr. Snow's contemporaries, Paul Sharits.) A problem is that too much of the work's interest lies in its dialogue with its precedent, which limits its power for viewers not familiar with Mr. Snow's film.