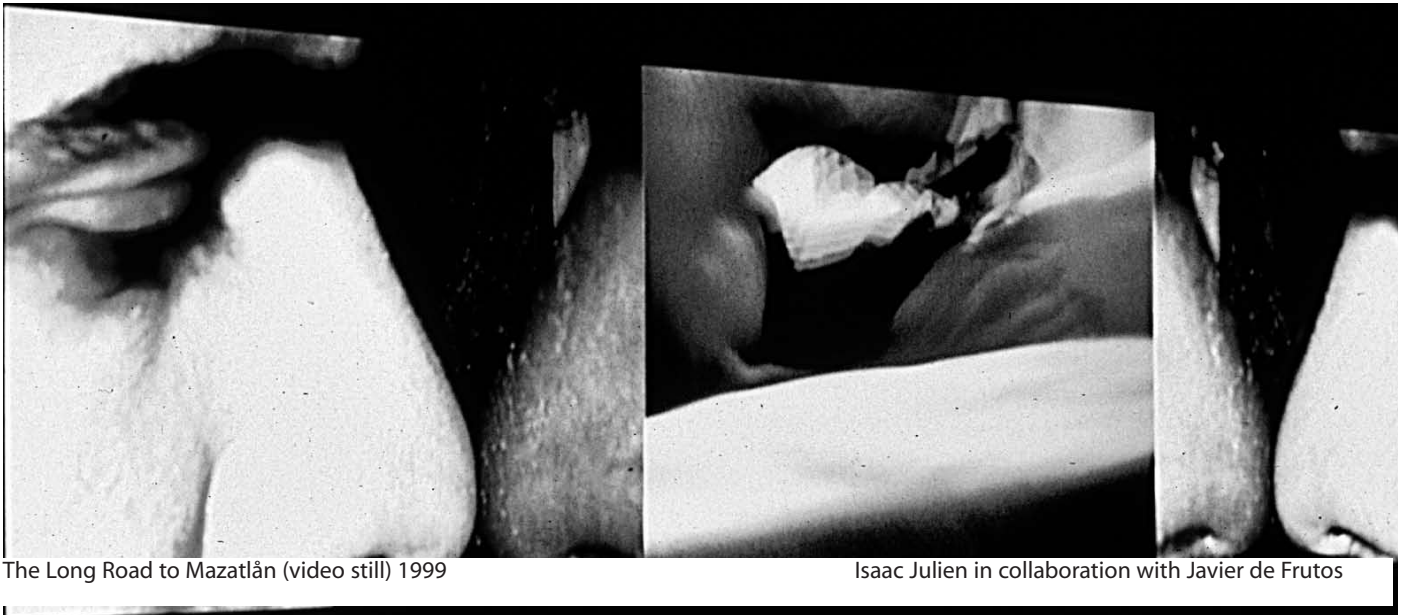

Video Art In Philadelphia—A British Invasion



The Long Road to Mazatlán (video still) 1999

Isaac Julien in collaboration with Javier de Frutos

Two British artists, exhibiting video installations in the same city, opening within a week of each other—coincidence or not? Outside of nationality and medium however, the comparisons end there. Each artist approaches the video medium from radically different perspectives. Graham Gussin in *States of Mind* presented at the Goldie Paley Gallery at Moore College of Art and Design (through October 21, 2001) employs a minimalist approach to video. He examines perception of the real and its relationship to imagined experience. The works are mundane and deceptively simple. Gussin dares the viewers to create their own visual experiences.

In *Falling Material* (1998), Gussin introduces six short pieces in which the background is an empty gallery space. The opening shot is of sound equipment emitting a repetitive, feedback chirping noise. The second scene opens with someone composing feedback sounds. Gussin does not attempt to create

any illusions. He highlights the simulacra or “simulated” experience by showing the equipment and human in the footage. The fourth scene is perhaps the most effective with sounds of roaring, blizzard-like wind emitting from the equipment. The intense sound architecturally defines the space. The lack of any visual aesthetic could frustrate some viewers, but it forces the audience to challenge their accepted notions of perception. The themes of urban and natural intervention and the construction of landscape are repeated in Gussin’s other works. The dual channel video work, *Beginning and Ending at the Same Time* (2001) displays two screens with the identical scene (mirror image), one zooming in and the other zooming out. The pushing and pulling effect of the video creates a tension in which the viewer awaits a culmination or climax. The expectation is thwarted however, as the scenes abruptly change. “In the viewer’s anticipation of this unknown event, the privileged



Photomontage for Fall (7,200-1) 1996-2000

Graham Gussin

moment continuously approaches, yet perhaps never arrives. Increasingly the perception and imagination of the viewer begin to construct something from this apparent void and the actual experience begins to form as a 'state of mind'." ⁱ

Gussin derives his inspiration from German landscape painters and science fiction films. In the single channel black and white film *Spill* (1999), smoke and mist shroud an empty warehouse. The event is the "appearance of nothing."ⁱⁱ The set and fog machine reference the 1950's B horror films. In *Untitled Film* (1998), a series of text slides sampled from science fiction films dissolve in and out, alluding to the passage of time, yet an unknown event. Phrases such as "L.A. 2019," and "A Month Later" suggest futuristic travel without visual cues to guide the trip. *Fall 7200: (1996-2000)* is a computer-generated video projection depicting a lake scene. The projection appears to have continuous motion, but is an optical illusion, derived from a series of still, looped images. Again, the anticipation of an event is the major crux of the piece. The work refers to the 1976 film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, when a space traveler crashes into a remote lake. Gussin has randomly programmed a "splash," but the chances of actually viewing it are 1 in 7200. The sounds of the water crashing against rocks defies the apparent calm of the water.

The real strength of the exhibit is the opportunity to view Gussin's compilation of work throughout the last five years. The grouping of the installations was an experiment for both the artist and the gallery. Due to the subtlety and minimalistic nature of his work, the pieces augmented one another, detailing his influences and repetitive explorations of the non-event and perception of reality. Gussin successfully challenges the viewers to question their experience of consumer culture and mass communications through the construction of time, space

and the interaction of man and nature.

Filmmaker Isaac Julien's three channel video installation, *The Long Road to Mazatlan* (at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia through October 13th, 2001), contrasts Gussin's work by its sheer lushness, both formally and conceptually. Julien, best known for his independent films (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, and *Young Soul Rebels*, 1991 to name two), explores issues of voyeurism, gay culture and seduction, utilizing the mythological iconography of the cowboy and the southwest landscape. The three screens each depict an alternate perspective of the scene. The cinemascopic vision envelops the viewer, while forcing consciousness onto the act of surveillance. The viewer becomes uncomfortably aware that he/she is witnessing private moments within a public space. By providing non-linear perspectives of the same scene, Julien forces the viewer to become an active spectator and deconstructs the illusion of film. Formally the piece is seamlessly edited, where characters flow from one screen to the next. Julien's use of repetition and abstraction enhances the symbolic nature of the film. The sound sculpturally defines the space; building tension and suspense, it drives the narrative forward.

At an artist lecture during the exhibit, cultural critic B. Ruby Rich and Isaac Julien discussed the transition from his previous work to *Mazatlan*. Julien departs from challenging representations of black culture and gay identity to crossing racial and cultural boundaries, linking universal archetypes to desire. The artist stated that he was drawn to the icon of the cowboy, because he witnessed aspects of the myth disseminating into gay and contemporary culture. For example, when he walked down the streets of London, he would encounter men in full cowboy attire (quite a distance from Texas!) The press statement referred to the theme of white masculinity in the

film. However, I question the veracity of that statement. The protagonists appear to be Latino. Race does not seem to be a focal point in the film. The piece seems much more focused on sexual politics and culture. Perhaps I am naïve, but in many ways, race seems to be transcended in the work; at worst, it's a non-issue.

I was seduced by the beauty of the film and asked Julien what role beauty plays in his work. He responded that his striving for beauty stems from his background as a painter. Employing beauty as a strategy is a way to seduce audiences into accessing difficult subject matter. The tension created between the visual "eye candy" and content fractures the hypnotic trance of beauty. Dave Hickey in his book entitled *The Invisible Dragon—Four Essays on Beauty* says that the "vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization."ⁱⁱⁱ

The most powerful scene of the film is in closing where the two protagonists are hitchhiking on the side of the road with a trio of showgirls prancing down the center. Julien collaborated with choreographer Javier de Frutos (who also stars in the film). I was overcome with how dance functioned as narrative in the work. The film is devoid of dialogue, which serves to enhance the impact of the body language of the protagonists as well as the layers of sound in the piece. The lyrical, exaggerated gestures of the two men refute the stereotypical "macho" quality associated with the cowboy. The men are oblivious to the vision of the showgirls. One cannot help but think of the film, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. To Julien, the ambiguous gender of the showgirls symbolizes a parting of gender roles. Libby Lumpkin in her essay on showgirls states, "An encounter with the showgirl entails coming to terms with a kind of sexual politics that is not preconditioned on feminine virtue, but is grounded in social relations of power."^{iv} It is the social relations of power that Julien so effectively explores in this mesmerizing work.



Book Review

Taking Liberties—Photographs by David Graham

Introduction by Robert Venturi

Pond Press, October 2001, \$29.95

In light of our country's recent tragedies and the outpouring of patriotism, how timely for the publication of David Graham's *Taking Liberties*. In his fourth book on the celebration of American culture, Graham takes the viewer on a roadside trip of over 3000 miles documenting the individuality and

quirkiness demarking the American landscape. Graham has been described as a visual anthropologist, photographing the evidence of cultural icons for over 30 years. From the hair doctor sign in Glen Avon, California to a giant shoe house in Hallan, Pennsylvania to a mammoth bronze statue of Lenin in front of Gotts Hamburgers in Dallas, Graham's straight forward depictions of the ornaments of consumerism make the viewer smile (even chuckle).

I asked Graham whether or not he has been accused of ridiculing his subjects. I expressed the difficulty and challenge in maintaining a balance between irony and ridicule when photographing this type of subject matter. He replied that he approaches his subjects with enthusiastic seriousness and that his intent is not to impose a critique upon the subjects, but to express the diversity of American culture. We also spoke about his use of color and the role of banality in his work. The book clearly shows a progression of images shot from 1988-2001. In the most recent images, the color is remarkably more dramatic. Previously Graham shied away from the inherent beauty in dramatic color and preferred to depict beauty in the everyday. The images are banal in the anti-minimalist way. They transform the ordinary into the extraordinary within a highly structured and complex frame.

The beautifully printed book features 68 color plates with an introduction by noted architect Robert Venturi. An exhibition of the work can be seen at the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, PA from October 20, 2001 – January 27, 2002. Everyone should buy the book (amazon.com), so Graham can feed his children.^v

Footnotes

ⁱ Quote from Goldie Paley Gallery artist statement.

ⁱⁱ Quote from gallery artist statement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hickey, Dave, *The Invisible Dragon—Four Essays on Beauty*, Los Angeles: Art Issues. Press, 1993, p. 24.

^{iv} Lumpkin, Libby, *Deep Design—Nine Little Art Histories*, Los Angeles: Art Issues. Press, 1999, p.83.

^v In all seriousness, I find it a crime that even the most successful artists who exhibit at major institutions, publish books, etc.. cannot make a living at their art. For the majority of us, it is a passion of the heart which never begins to fill our pocketbooks.

Colette Copeland is a nationally established artist who recently completed a three-year fellowship at Syracuse University to pursue an M.F.A. in Art Media Studies.



Sin, Bath, Maine

David Graham



The Long Road to Mazatlán (video still) 1999 Isaac Julien in collaboration with Javier de Frutos