Pleats of Matter:
The Films of Blake Williams

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In your earlier works I sense an interest in working with found images and with static visual composition, but the mature films, while still extending the visual aspect into new territory, deal with programmatic elements. That is to say, they compose an experience of obscurity as dense as one can imagine modern obscurity to be—the programmatic source, be it Tchaikovsky or Yoshizawa, is concealed, transmuted into the form itself. How do you arrive at these programmatic elements? They almost always arrive as impulses, prompted by some sort of initial direction I happened upon from working through a bit of footage, or testing out a quick idea. And as I mentioned before, they become guiding principles for completing the work—filling it out, complicating the structure or technical methodologies, etc. I tend to eventually try to bury these elements in the final product, though; obscuring them beneath and within the work so that it doesn’t leap out and over—determine a reading of it or point to a line of thinking that will negate the other possible, equally valid pathways through it. My hope with each piece is that it will suggest enough that it lingers, but withhold enough that it remains plasmatic, unable to calcify into a final, static object in the viewer’s mind and memory. It’s tricky maintaining that balance, though, since so many of my pieces originate from structural forms that are ultimately very carefully calculated. But solving that problem is probably my favourite...
ABOUT THE PROGRAM

One of North America’s most exciting young filmmakers, Blake Williams has spent the past few years experimenting with anaglyph 3D technology, emerging with a series of films that formally investigate a variety of otherwise quotidian spaces by casually unlocking their nascent art-historical dimensions. At once playfully conceptual and viscerally charged, his films merge the aesthetics of the digital age with the tools of classic optical technologies, playing light, shadow, and other natural phenomenon off one another in hyper-sensory displays of depth and color. His two latest works, Red Capriccio (2014) and Something Horizontal (2015), represent the pinnacle this approach to date, and together have travelled to the Toronto, New York, and Oberhausen film festivals. Tonight’s two-part program, featuring a selection of work in both 2D and 3D, is the first presentation of Williams’ work in Los Angeles.

PROGRAM

Part One [2D]
A Cold Compress (2010, 12:25)
Depart (2012, 10:00)
Coorow-Latham Road (2011, 15:36)
C-LR: For Those Who Don’t Have the Time (2013, 1:46)

Part Two [3D]
Many a Swan (2012, 5:43)
Baby Blue (2013, 10:00)
Red Capriccio (2014, 6:48)
Something Horizontal (2015, 9:43)

INTERVIEW WITH BLAKE WILLIAMS

The following is an excerpt of an interview by filmmaker Stephen Broomer with Blake Williams, originally published at The Seventh Art on January 19, 2015.

Stephen Broomer: Quite a bit of your work from 2010 onward uses technological interfaces. I see No Signal (2009) as the beginning of a strain in your work in which technologies make self-conscious appearances—as in the charts, grids, and diagrams of Depart (2011) and the clear implication of Google Earth in Coorow-Latham Road (2011). The technologies always perform at the behest of an unseen operator, but there is a sense of autonomy cast around those gestures.

Blake Williams: No Signal was the first piece I made in my Masters program at University of Toronto. I had a studio for the first time in my life—a 300 square foot room with hardwood floors and high ceilings—and felt I should take advantage of the space. All of the work and experiments I did in that first year, including A Cold Compress and Space-ship, came in the time I spent with that studio. I was also looking into Bruce Nauman’s practice—the artist in his studio, the artist with his tools—and I was trying my hand at portraiture, in the loose sense of the term. These were usually self-portraits, but A Cold Compress was a portrait of another individual.

I wanted to do a series of work that was about the hand of the artist in a digital context, where the hand is felt or implied but not seen in the way it would be in a more tactile or analog image-making practice. Depart was the beginning of this, and the only other video in this line of thinking is Coorow-Latham Road. These both came out of a crisis I was having about the loss of my sense of authorship when I began to work with found footage that I was pulling from YouTube. So I wanted to see how
much of my own hand or body, my own presence, I could work into these images that did not belong to me. Both Depart and Coorow-Latham Road started out with very different intentions in terms of what I wanted them to be, though. For Coorow, initially I was filming my screen while clicking and dragging some Google Streetview landscapes around with my mouse, and trying to do it in such a way that it looked as if I were physically there at this place holding a camera and doing a handheld pan. The results themselves weren’t too great, but it led me to something I loved.

**Broomer:** How did you first become interested in 3D filmmaking?

**Williams:** I went to the New York Film Festival’s Views from the Avant-Garde section for the first time in 2011 and that year there was a 3D film there, about 45–50 minutes long, that was just this computer animated chair rotating or something, and I thought it was just awful. But it got me intrigued about the idea of experimental possibilities for 3D filmmaking, since the closest to a non-traditional use of the format I had seen up to that point was Herzog’s Cave of Forgotten Dreams, which I loved. I think there were also some rumblings about Godard’s interest in making a 3D feature that were starting to circulate, so it seemed like the right moment to dive into territory that was still largely unexplored, which is always exciting.

Naturally, the first thing I wanted to do was make a post-conversion of Michael Snow’s Wavelength into 3D—to just take that awful VHS rip that’s on YouTube and give it perspectival depth illusions and have the figures walking around like paper cutouts in three-dimensional space, and then have the film end, as it does, back in flatness. I actually started making it, and worked on it for about four months before I got tired of how tedious the process was and decided to drop it and move on.

**Broomer:** One of the things that struck me when I first saw Many a Swan was the ambition toward a kind of thematic coherence emerging out of a heterodox series—the heterodox series that, on contemplation, is clarified as a metaphorical thread, as in the bending of a leg, the turning of a bend, the force of the tectonic fold and bend that would birth the Grand Canyon. And so form and content achieve this simultaneity, in the folding up, in the enclosure to force a new form, that it takes from origami. Tell me more about how you relate this work to origami.

**Williams:** After toying around with the Wavelength experiment, I remained interested in this idea of post-converting 2D footage into 3D, so my first 3D film, Many a Swan, is essentially concerned with the most fundamental way of taking a flat plane and making it sculptural: folding it. It was only after working on it for several weeks that the origami analogy became clear to me, so I worked allusions to that tradition into the entire film. I became very moved by the work of Akira Yoshizawa through my research, so wanted to dedicate the film to him, hence the film ending on footage of him instructing an audience on how to fold a paper swan. For me the Grand Canyon footage was always about a new layer to the concept of folding, since the canyon is essentially a folded landscape.

**Broomer:** Baby Blue extends from this same sense of conceptual or thematic joining of images sourced out of the ether. There, you’re working with these monocular subjects—the astronaut, the Cyclops, the one-eyed Bengali cat. This thread signs a particular confrontation with the bifocal of the anaglyph. You once said to me that this monocular thread is broadcast first in the head of the astronaut, which is, in your words, consumed by a single, central window into the world.

**Williams:** Yes, this film is very much about the concept of the Cyclops, and the beauty and perils of not only monocular (single-view) experience of the world, but also myopia. First, it’s there in the film’s 3D methodology, which like Many a Swan is also dependent on post-conversions of 2D footage, though here the 3D is created by showing the same footage to each eye a few frames apart so that the horizontal motions of the camera or its subjects can be seen from two distinct perspectives. But it’s also there in the footage itself. Once again almost all of the video was culled from YouTube, and it all deals with
travel, disaster (mostly from technological failures), and the singular, imprisoned gazes of various subjects unable to see outside themselves. The film is bookended by images pertaining to NASA and space travel, and the utter failure of that endeavor to bring us to something beyond our world. It culminates in a stereo-temporal stare at the body of a mutant, one-eyed kitten, thrown into the world dead on arrival—our eyes see this event at discernibly distinct moments, creating an image superimposition rather than a unified, stereoscopic image (not unlike the famous 3D split screen moment that Godard used in Adieu au langage a year later).

Broomer: In your earlier works I sense an interest in working with found images and with static visual composition, and with, as you describe, impulses toward or away from tactility, but the mature films, say the ones beginning with Many a Swan, while still extending the visual aspect into new territory, deal with programmatic elements. That is to say, they compose an experience of obscurity as dense as one can imagine modern obscurity to be—the programmatic source, be it Tchaikovsky or Yoshizawa, is concealed, transmuted into the form itself. How do you arrive at these programmatic aspects to your work?

Williams: They almost always arrive as impulses, prompted by some sort of initial direction I happen upon from working through a bit of footage, or testing out a quick idea. And as I mentioned before, they become guiding principles for completing the work—filling it out, complicating the structure or technical methodologies, etc. I tend to eventually try to bury these elements in the final product, though; obscuring them beneath and within the work so that it doesn’t leap out and over-determine a reading of it or point to a line of thinking that will negate the other possible, equally valid pathways through it. My hope with each piece is that it will suggest enough that it lingers, but withhold enough that it remains plasmatic, unable to calcify into a final, static object in the viewer’s mind and memory. It’s tricky maintaining that balance, though, since so many of my pieces originate from structural forms that are ultimately very carefully calculated. But solving that problem is probably my favourite part of the production process.

Upcoming Events

March 11, 2016 ~ Isiah Medina’s 88:88
Los Angeles premiere of Isiah Medina’s extraordinary feature debut.

Time: 7:30 & 9:00pm
Location: Echo Park Film Center
Address: 1200 N. Alvarado St, Los Angeles, CA 90026

"Medina’s is a cinema of the cut, of difference, of reconsidering every assumption of more than a half century’s worth of filmmaking....I could say that 88:88 is a masterpiece, but masterpieces are the domain of the past; Medina has taken his first step into the future."
Phil Coldiron, Cinema Scope