

Cowboys and Indians, again

Moments of playfulness almost evaporate in Steve Carr's, *Cowboy and Indians*, 2002, as the images portrayed provoke memories of old ways of knowing and being in the world. Carr's video creates a somewhat nostalgic visual spectacle as he enthusiastically emerges with a group of children in what appears to be a familiar dress-up game. His work presents the viewer with a particular historical representation that was, for many and maybe for Carr himself, a regular suburban childhood pastime; an-other historical narrative acted out in make-believe.

In many childhoods, the make-believe game of Cowboys and Indians has been repetitively played out in ways that offered its players opportunities to explore different identities and subjectivities. In play narratives, where boundaries between the real and the fictitious are blurred, identities and subject positions are frequently assigned different sometimes extreme or adventurous characteristics that include, for example, good and bad, big and little, powerful and weak, winner and loser. These characteristics are played out in order to explore, establish or reinforce concepts, such as strength, power, and domination. Carr's character is the only big person (the only adult) in the picture and he wears the sheriff's badge: he is the lone ranger yet he seems to surrender any powers of control (or maybe powers of protection) as he allows himself to be captured by the Indians and tied to a (old rotary clothes line) post to be 'executed'; a symbolic battle is won – or lost?

The symbolic visual imagery in Carr's video provokes a reminiscing of other mythical and historical stories, for example, of Gulliver's Travels. The consequences of traversing time and place resulted in Gulliver's fate being placed in the hands of the small and delicate Lilliputians – he awoke to find himself a captive of the little people who had tied him with rope as he lay sleeping. Or of the fate of Saint Sebastian, an officer in the guard of the Roman emperor Diocletianus who having converted to Christianity was sentenced to execution – he was tied to a post and left for dead after his body had been repeatedly shot by arrows. Reliving past historical and other narratives, real or fictitious, offers ways of understanding the multiplicity of identities constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, positions and practices. Toon van Meijl suggests aspects of identity cannot be identified in isolation of other identities and identifications. Histories are an important resource in the articulation of identities in the present and the future; they offer "a coming-to-terms-with (the various) 'routes'". Some tracking or continuity with historical pasts is important to understanding how identities can be continuously re-constituted in order for us to rearticulate our understandings of self

and other in a variety of different ways that are responsive to the rapidly changing circumstances in a rapidly changing world.

Carr's video is shot in a suburban backyard; although the landscape portrayed is uncultivated, it hints at something domestic, something fertile. Perhaps it challenges the viewer to consider that what might be being bought into question here is not only what is often presumed to represent, for example, the innocence of childhood, childhood's play or make-believe play narratives, but also the identity of the artist, and/or of adulthood. Bugden comments that Carr's *Cowboy and Indians, 2002* suggests 'perhaps artists are the last adults to retain a sense of child-like play and wonder.' Yet Carr's playful actions sabotage a supposed sense of child-like play and wonder exposing an imagined game where a number of other stereotypical identities are acted out; identities that include, cowboy and indian, aggressor and victim, adult and child, male and female, are bought to our attention.

The mimetic nature of playing makes it both interpretive and transformative. Winnicott once described playing as precariously placed on the theoretical line between subjectivity and objectivity; a transitional phenomena, an experience in the space-time continuum. He suggested playing works in this way for both children and adults. Hence, play's make-believe narratives act as intersections: in between spaces where temporary attachments to different subject positions offer rearticulated understandings of self and other. Understanding childhood's play and make-believe narratives in this way offers ways of understanding childhood's as well as adulthood's subjectivities as fluid never-ending processes, always incomplete, unfinished and open ended. *In Cowboy and Indians, 2002*, Carr orchestrates a playful scenario and his co-players, although with some reticence, actively, knowingly participate – they shoot Carr with the garden hose. Although the identities revealed in the process may be ambiguous, a space exists where other narratives, those of the viewer, come into play.

All along, *Cowboy and Indians, 2002* provokes a sense of discomfit – we know someone's just playing, just having fun yet Carr's rendition of this childhood make believe narrative remains tagged with a 'beware, proceed with caution' sticker.