



Fool's Gold

The Recent Films of Steve Carr

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Huge carnations hover in half-dozen clusters on the wall. Their wavering reflections pool on the polished floor. They start their lives looking like balls of cotton rags—white, bunchy, frayed. Then, colour starts to gather at their fringes, and grows into a slow leach that turns them yellow, or pink, or blue. The flowers' inner folds wobble slightly, and there is a more general sway at their outer limits—a kind of jetlagged, peripheral rocking. Single petals slowly peel away from their bulbs; minuscule movements (it is impossible to know exactly when and where they will occur) that turn into sublime shocks, and come with the heartbreaking awareness that you may not catch another one for hours. And yet for all that, there is still the sense that maybe nothing is happening. A young woman walks into the flower-filled room, and is convinced she is seeing a still image. Even when she sees a petal move, and wonders aloud whether the flowers are changing colour before her eyes, she maintains it is all a ruse.

Steve Carr's 2014 *Transpiration* is the culmination of his ten-week residency at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. There is nothing special about his flowers, which are just shop-bought blooms. The process being witnessed is pretty basic too. The carnations are sitting in unseen pots of coloured water, sucking it up

through their stems. It is a primary school magic trick, a way to teach kids about natural science, as well as a cheap device florists use to stain their stock. Carr has shot the process over 24 hours with a time-lapse camera, then stitched it together into a seeping loop of around 15 minutes, which runs forwards and back so that we witness the flower's inhalation and exhalation as a constant, tidal pulse.

The banality of the work's origins is also transformed by the weight of art history. Although the flowers are not painted, they are thick with paint. Their ragged edges are like the final drags of a brush before it breaks from the surface. The white on black is as stark and luminescent as Manet (one of the greatest flower painters), or Chardin, or even Velázquez. Carr's carnations are also a clear nod to Andy Warhol's *Flowers*, and to the film that caused the Pop artist to make them: Jean Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus*, in which, in the final scene, a white rose lands in a pool of blood and turns deep red. From Cocteau to Warhol to Carr; a complicated family lineage that reaches through classroom science experiments, through Pop and Impressionism, all the way back to seventeenth-century still-lives. Except that Carr's flowers are never still.

Carr has also filled the room with a low drone, which hums just below the gallery's air conditioning units and video projector fans. This is punctuated

(opposite) STEVE CARR *Transpiration* 2014
6-channel installation, Sony XD, duration 15 mins (looped)
(Photograph: Max Bellamy)

(right) STEVE CARR *American Night* 2014
Single channel film, Blackmagic 4K, duration 15 mins (looped)

(below) STEVE CARR *Air Guitar* 2001
Single channel film, VHS, duration 11 mins 24 secs

every 15 minutes by the bright chirps of a mechanical bird, coming from a television screen in one corner. In *American Night* (2014) the little bird perches on a fake branch against a background of spring blossom. It is so obviously a set-up that it initially seems incongruous alongside Carr's floral illusion. But as the screen's artificial day disappears into false night, it becomes clear that here too we are witnessing a 24-hour cycle shrunk to a handful of minutes. As the sun comes up, the little bird lets off its frenetic tweet; a few seconds of fake birdsong. As with *Transpiration*, Carr is riffing here on one of the great final scenes of modern cinema, this time David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, when a fake bird closes out the auteur's bizarre dreamscape.

In the time it takes us to watch the bird's daily cycle, everything is new, different, and somewhere else: blues are white and whites are pink and some yellows have turned so bright they are almost phosphorescent green. It is a remarkable installation, maybe the best Carr has ever made; the strongest evidence yet of his ever-increasing ability to control, and re-invent, the complex interaction between filmic materiality and cinematic time. He seems to have an innate ability to match the tool to the job, whether it be 16mm film, HD video, the crappy camera on his old MacBook, time-lapse photography, or the revolutionary Phantom camera. Crucially though, Carr's videos are never about cameras and the tricks they can pull. They are about screens, in the same way that paintings are about screens: material things that act as images, as windows, and as defeaters of sensible time. The result is the same too; like great painting, Carr's work is about bodily exchange, affect, and what happens to our experience of the space *around* the work—like the young woman who swore she had seen a mirage—when we walk away from it.

Such readings—such elevations, even—depart from the standard wisdom about Carr. His work is usually seen as charming and cheeky, underpinned by a boyish taste for exhibitionism. He first came to prominence, for example, with *Air Guitar* (2001), a video presented for his final student exhibition at Elam School of Fine Arts. In it, Carr acts out a stadium-rock fantasy, miming, with remarkable accuracy despite the stone-silence, a classic track from guitar god Joe Satriani's album *Surfing with the Alien*.

Things start as one would expect in any teenage boy's bedroom, but then Carr dials the hubris up to ten; as a smoke machine shrouds him in a starstruck fog he grows in confidence and strut, even letting off a couple of Pete Townshend-style windmills before returning to his phantom solo. As funny as it is, Carr's silent performance hones in on a second layer of teenage male fantasy—all the bucking, thrusting, and



straining make it clear that this is, more than anything else, a wank video. Watching Carr pounding away at his absent axe becomes both ridiculous and awkward; he turns us into his collective mum, walking in at the worst possible moment.

This willfully untoward sexuality did not pass in a hurry. In 2002, he made *Pillow Fight*, in which he and a group of teenage girls have a pyjama party and smash each other with pillows, sending clouds of feathers into the air. In the same year, he borrowed an ice-cream van for *Mr Whippy*, in which he parks up outside a primary school and serves up free cones to little kids. Not long after came *Dive Pool*: a beautiful film shot underwater of Carr in a scuba mask, watching bikini-clad women swim past him while he sucks in oxygen—evenly, mechanically—from the tank on his back. Ostensibly, there was nothing wrong with any of these acts, except of course, that *everything* was wrong with them; Carr used plausible deniability to infect childish innocence with an implicit deviancy. For some critics, the cumulative effect tipped past the early humour of *Air Guitar* and into a more corrupt space. Rather than backing down, Carr, ever the comedian, made one of his funniest and most awkward films in response: *Tiger Girls* (2004), in which he sits in a spa pool filled with attractive young women and proceeds to do absolutely nothing—except drain several bottles of Tiger Beer.

This focus on Carr's juvenility blinded many observers to the deeper forces at play in his work. There is no question that his early games, performances and gags were adolescent. But they were also important steps in his attempt to master a more general, archetypal condition: Carr is, above all else, a trickster. In his brilliant book *Trickster Makes*



This World, Lewis Hyde shows us that the trickster is, in every culture in which it appears, a force for cultural change. Central to this is the trickster's power to step across the thresholds between gods and men, and life and death, unencumbered or deliberately negligent of the rules that dictate behaviour in each. For example, a trickster might steal fire from the gods, giving us mortals our first and most important technology. But he is also responsible for the forces that keep us rooted in our own mortality; most notably, our desires—our need to eat, to drink, to fight, to love, to fuck, and so on. His mischief reminds us that we are only flesh and bone, and that our bodies are both contingent on, and vulnerable to, our appetites (little wonder then, that Carr's early works were full of food, booze, and sex).

In order to cause cultural change, tricksters often have to change themselves—they are shapeshifters. Right from the start, Carr underwent a series of magical transformations for revelatory ends. In *Air Guitar*, he becomes a masturbating Satriani. In *Tyson* (2002), he becomes half-animal, squaring off with his pet dog over a tennis ball. In *Cowboy and Indians* (2004), he becomes a disturbing man-child, and in *Pillow Fight*, a teenage girl.

He is also a transformer of material. He has turned fire extinguishers into glass, bear rugs into wood, and routinely smashes open spheres and circles to reveal the secrets inside: corn kernels exploded into popcorn, apples destroyed by a slow-moving bullet, elite golf balls sliced in two, the grease-stains left in pizza boxes. This magic is often accompanied by an inability to resist showing us how his tricks are done. In *Table Cloth Pull* (2007) for instance, we see him fail a 'Magic 101' task miserably; in *Smoke Train* (2005), a mother teaches her five-year-old daughter a smoking trick; and in *Turkey Shoot* (2009), we watch raw poultry transform, at the hands of a magazine stylist, into a

mouth-watering yet still uncooked roast. Even the steam emanating from it is fraudulent; it is cigarette smoke turned into photogenic plumes by a little baster.

The interconnectedness between these mercurial forces—sex, mischief, humour, magic, illusion—came to a head in one of Carr's finest works; his 16mm film *Burn Out* (2009). On an early West Auckland morning, a young man in a black car does exactly what the title suggests. But rather than jump-cuts and heavy-metal, as one usually gets on YouTube videos of burnouts, Carr's event is shot at distance, against lush Henderson bush, with no sound. There is a rough, transformative physicality to the action: rubber turning into smoke for no good reason other than for its beautiful grandeur. But it is also an empty, dislocated act of masculinity—there are no girls, no guitars, no open beer cans. Halfway through, an elderly man comes out to see what is going on. He leans in through the passenger window and says something to the driver, then raises a hand and walks away—embarrassed or satisfied with what he has discovered, we will never know.

It is, in many ways, *Air Guitar* redux; there is smoke, circles, humour, solitary romance, hopeless bogan endeavour. Except what we are witnessing this time is not a fantasy or a jack-off but a tangible transformation (rubber combusting into smoke) that acts as a stand-in for the artist himself—a kind of self-portrait through material. This is a vital shift; in his early works, Carr himself took us across moral and magical thresholds, but with *Burn Out* and everything since, he uses matter undergoing extreme change to lead us over material boundaries instead.

Nowhere is this clearer than in *Screen Shots* (2011). Across nine monitors arranged in a three-by-three grid, we see the artist's hand slowly pricking paint-filled balloons against a coloured background. As



the pin slips in and each balloon peels back, there is a brief and wondrous moment in which the paint holds its shape and wobbles in mid-air before coming apart. Once again, Carr transforms a childish pleasure (blowing up a paint bomb) into something erotic and sublime. The explosions are filmed using a Phantom camera, which is capable of shooting high-definition footage at more than 5,400 frames per second. It is designed to show us things our eyes were not meant to see. Here, Carr uses it for exactly that purpose, though whether we are meant to read the slowed-down explosions as successes or failures of control is unclear. It is important to note that Carr does not use the Phantom here to get off on its technological capabilities, but rather to create an image of total bodily empathy. His balloons, and the illicitly exposed paint they contain, hang like organs and burst with human release. To over-emphasise this, they are presented on 32-inch screens, which provide a 1:1 scale between the artist/magician's hand and our own. Carr cannot resist a dig at art history here either, crashing the absurdity of Abstract Expressionism's drippy masculinity into its fussy, industrial Other—the pristine Minimalist grid.

In *Dead Time* (2012), Carr uses the Phantom to mine even more deeply into art history. Seven screens hang, like still-life paintings, in a row. On each, a single apple is suspended from a string against (like his later flowers) a black ground. The inspiration for his composition is obvious and unhidden: the paintings of the Spanish master Juan Sánchez Cotán. Each apple is just different enough for us to realize that it is not the same image repeated seven times. Then we are forced to wait, and wait. But for those patient enough to stick with it, the payoff arrives—a William Tell succession of explosions as each apple is obliterated, one after the other, by a single bullet that traces visibly across the screens. By stretching an event that lasts a few seconds to several minutes, Carr allows us to witness not just action, but total, painterly disintegration. Towards the end, the last flecks of apple flesh look like stars spread across black space—a Big Bang that tricks us into thinking, just for a moment, that we are staring into the heart of the universe.

Transpiration, then, is more than a one-off victory over time and space; it is the culmination of an intense period of magical experimentation. Carr's carnations are the sorts of things a clown might use to squirt you in the eye. But they are also paintings, bodies, organs demanding a slow release, and things experiencing their own death, over and again. This is Carr's alchemy: his ability to turn the basest of materials—apples, balloons, carnations, tyres—into gold. The great sophistication of his recent works lies in his recognition that the forces of material transformation



in which he is so interested—combustion, explosion, degradation, disintegration, transpiration—are, like cinema, entirely contingent on time, and that the tools of his trade give him the ability not only to witness change, but completely alter our experience of it. Carr has always tested our patience, and he has always been a Fool. But now, he is also a magician, and a generous one at that, who allows us to breathe underwater, see the universe in a shattered apple, walk into a painting, and disappear with him into clouds of smoke.



(opposite) STEVE CARR *Dead Time* 2012
7-channel installation, Phantom Flex, duration 520 sec
(Photograph: Jarrod Rawlins)

(above) STEVE CARR *Screen Shots* 2011
9-channel installation, Phantom Flex, duration 26 min 22 sec (looped)

(right) STEVE CARR *Burn Out* 2009
Single channel film, Super 16mm, duration 4 mins 53 secs