

SMOKE & MIRRORS

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK TO THE SINEWY WUNDERKIND OF DIGITAL VIDEO, ARTIST STEVE CARR DEMONSTRATES A STILL-STRICT REVERENCE FOR THE TENETS OF CELLULOID. IN FACT, SINCE FIRST SHOWING WITH MICHAEL LETT IN 2003, HE'S CONSISTENTLY SHOT ON 16MM (BAR DIVEPOOL, WHICH WAS 8MM), AND THE THREE FILMS MAKING UP HIS LATEST SHOW, SMOKE AND MIRRORS, ALL APPEAR IN 35MM. NO DOUBT, IT'S A RIGOUR THAT LEAVES HIM INCONGRUOUS IN THE SMALLER SCHEME OF AUCKLAND'S ART WORLD, AND ONE THAT'S EVEN MORE ESTRANGING GIVEN THE SEEMING EFFERVESCENCE OF HIS WORK. 2004'S TIGER GIRLS - CONSISTING OF CARR LOUNGING APATHETICALLY IN A SPA POOL, DRINKING BEER AS A THRONG OF MODELS HOVER AROUND HIM - MAY BE THE HIGH-TIDE OF THAT RIFT IN SENSIBILITY. MORE THAN CONCEALING ITS LACK, HOWEVER, THE FILM DOES EVERYTHING IT CAN TO EMBODY THIS NEGATIVE SPACE; STEERING PLAYFULLY BETWEEN BEER COMMERCIAL AND ILLUSTRIOUS IN-JOKE (THE JOKE BEING THAT THERE IS NO JOKE), TIGER GIRLS BECOMES THE GIDDY SUM OF ITS SIGNIFIERS, A YAWNING FRESCO OF PRIVILEGE.

NEVERTHELESS, IN SPITE OF ANY SURFACE TRAPPINGS, THERE'S A CERTAIN NAIVETÉ TO CARR'S PERSONA THAT STAVES OFF THE HIGH-NOTE OF INDULGENCE - A FACT WHICH BECOMES OF PARTICULAR IMPORT TO THE FILMS INVOLVING CHILDREN. LOOSELY THEMED AROUND SUMMER ABANDON, AND CONSISTING OF AN UNBROKEN FIELD OF ACTION, EACH ONE DEMONSTRATES AN UNERRING FIDELITY TO ITS TITLE: HAYFIGHT, FOR INSTANCE, HAS CARR AND THREE YOUNG GIRLS EXUBERANTLY HEAPING HAY ON ONE ANOTHER; PILLOWFIGHT FOLLOWS SIMILAR SUITE, ONLY PILLOWS TAKE FORTE, ETC. GRANTED, THE PROSPECT OF SEXUAL WEBBING WILL ALWAYS BE INEVITABLE (PARTICULARLY GIVEN THAT IT MAGNIFIES OR DULLS DEPENDING ON WHICH WAY YOU TWIST THE RUBIK'S), BUT CARR'S PRESENCE IN THE FILMS IS MORE ONE OF SELF-DETERMINED CREATOR; OBTUSE, LIKE AN OVERGROWN KID, HIS ATTEMPTS TO BLEND IN RENDER HIM ALL THE MORE CONSPICUOUS. IT'S THIS PUNCTURE TO THE SURFACE WHICH ULTIMATELY SOURS THE DEW OF NOSTALGIA, EXPOSING IT AS A REFLEX LIKE ANY ANOTHER. YET RATHER THAN COLLAPSE INWARDS, THE RUSH OF FANCY ONLY SEEMS TO INFLATE THE FILMS; IN THEIR UNREALITY, THEY APPEAR ALL THE MORE VISCERAL.

DRIVEN BY PARADOX AS SUCH, CARR'S WORK BECOMES THE CRYSTAL DETERMINANT OF NICOLAS BOURRIAUD'S PREMISE, THAT

CONFRONTING THE SAVAGENESS OF A MEDIUM MEANS HAVING TO UNLOCK ITS UNIQUE MO. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF DV IS THAT IT ENACT A FACILITATION OF MOVEMENT, ALLOWING FOR AN ENDLESS CAPTURE OF FOOTAGE. BUT THE FURTHER YOU DRIVE IT TO THE LIMITS OF ITS PROPERTIES, THE MORE IT BECOMES STYMIED IN CONTRADICTION, EACH OFF-THE-CUFF SCREEN-MOMENT THE RENDITION OF LEAGUES OF SEARCHING. FILM IS A WEDGE PLACED BETWEEN THE ARTIST AND HIS CIRCUMSTANCE, A FACT THAT BEARS ALMOST PHYSICAL INSCRIPTION IN THE SHEER SIZE OF A 35MM CAMERA. YET, FOR ALL THE EFFORT IT GOES TO TO EMBALM THE WORLD, THERE'S A FRAGILE SINGULARITY TO THE IMAGE IT FINALLY PRESENTS, BOTH MATERIALLY (THE CELLULOID REEL, AND ITS PROPENSITY TOWARDS DECAY, AS WELL AS THE GENERAL FINANCIAL RESTRICTION ON RE-SHOOTING) AND EXTRA-MATERIALLY (THE PROJECTION OF LIGHT INTO SPACE). BY INSERTING HIMSELF INTO HIS FILMS SO LIBERALLY, WHAT CARR ACHIEVES IS A RE-RECOGNITION OF THE FORMAT'S MOMENTARINESS, AT LEAST INSOFAR AS THE PROSPECT OF A 'CREATOR' BECOMES SUBJECT TO THE SAME CONDITIONS AS EVERYTHING ELSE ON-SCREEN. PILLOWFIGHT AND HAYFIGHT OCCUR AS CONTINUOUS STREAMS OF ACTION, AND BY SECEDING TOTAL CONTROL OFF-SCREEN, CARR ACKNOWLEDGES HIS OWN CULPABILITY AS GENERATOR. YET, DESPITE AN ALMOST CULT-LIKE SELF-RECOGNITION, THERE'S NEVER THE NEED FOR EXTERNAL MOVEMENT TO VALIDATE HIS EXISTENCE; RATHER, WE'RE SIMPLY MEANT TO ACCEPT THE FILMS AS CONDITIONS OF THAT EXISTENCE.

IN EFFECT, THE THREE WORKS MAKING UP SMOKE AND MIRRORS INVERT THE NARRATIVELINE OF THOSE FEATURING CHILDREN, BUT TOWARDS A SIMILAR END: BASICALLY, WHERE AS THE LATTER IMPLIED CONSISTENT ACTION AS A WAY OF ULTIMATELY SUSTAINING THE MOMENT, THE THREE NEW FILMS MOUNT TOWARDS A SINGLE CRESCENDO, WHOSE APPEARANCE IS SIMULTANEOUSLY A KIND OF BIRTH AND DEATH. THE FIRST FILM, TABLE CLOTH PULL, ENACTS A SCENE IN WHICH A TABLECLOTH IS WRENCHED FROM UNDER A PLACE SETTING, THE INTENDED EFFECT BEING THAT THE PLATES AND GLASSES REMAIN PERFECTLY IN PLACE, WEIGHTED BY THEIR OWN INERTIA. YET CARR, CLAD IN MAGICIAN'S BLACK, AND WITH AN AIR OF DROLL MACHISMO ABOUT HIM, BLOWS IT, SENDING EVERYTHING CRASHING AND BRINGING THE FILM TO AN ABRUPT HALT. OF COURSE, TO HAVE PULLED IT OFF WOULD HAVE BEEN INCONSISTENT WITH CARR'S OUTLOOK, BECAUSE IT WOULD HAVE CONFIRMED FILM'S STATUS AS AN INDELIBLE RECORD OF PERFECT MOMENTS. INSTEAD, BY RESTRICTING HIMSELF TO A SINGLE TAKE,

CARR ONCE AGAIN SECEDES CONTROL, HERE USING THE VÉRITÉ OF A PARLOUR TRICK IN ORDER TO RENDER TRANSPARENT FILM'S IMPERMANENCE; IN THE END, THE POINT ISN'T WHAT HAPPENS BUT JUST THAT SOMETHING HAPPENS, TO BREAK THE STASIS OF THE SCENE AND LEAD THE FILM THROUGH ITS NATURAL LIFE CYCLE.

THE SAME PRINCIPLE GOVERNS SPLASH, WHICH SUFFERS TENSION IN THE GAP BETWEEN THE OPENING VISTA - A CALM, UNHINDERED BODY OF WATER - AND ITS PRESCIENT TITLE. FOR EXACTLY THIRTY-ONE SECONDS, THE CAMERA REMAINS CONCENTRATED ON THE SOFT RIPPLING OF THE SCENE, UNTIL A BLURRY ORB OF STARK-RED SWIMWEAR AND BROWN FACIAL-HAIR ERUPTS THE MISE-EN-SCENE. CARR ELIDES SOUND, ALLOWING FOCUS TO FALL ON THE PURE SPECTACLE OF ACTION, AND HIMSELF EMERGES FROM THE WATER SEVERAL SECONDS LATER, SWIMMING OBLIVIOUSLY OUT OF THE FRAME. IN HIS SERENITY, HE STANDS IN MARKED CONTRAST TO THE ADOLESCENT OVERREACHING OF THE EARLIER FILMS - A FACT THAT NICELY MIRRORS THE PRESENT REFINEMENT OF HIS PRACTICE.

FOR ALL THE FLUENT PAGEANTRY OF THE FIRST TWO FILMS THOUGH, IT'S THE THIRD WHICH, IN ITS SIMPLICITY, ATTAINS THE MOST GRANDEUR. LESS A DISPLAY OF SKILL (LIKE THE AFOREMENTIONED TWO) THAN FOLK-SPUN CURIOSITY, CIGARETTE TREE INVOLVES THE PLASTIC WRAPPING OF A PACK OF CIGARETTES BEING DRAWN ABOVE THE BOX, AND THEN LINED WITH PAPER-ENDS. AS THE ENDS ARE LIT, THE SMOKE RELEASED FROM EACH SLOWLY CURLS INWARDS, ENSCONCING THE WRAPPING IN WREATHS OF FOG. THEN, GRADUALLY, ONCE THE ENDS BEGIN TO BURN OUT, THE WRAPPING COLLAPSES INWARDS, UNTIL IT RESEMBLES NOTHING MORE THAN A SMOKY, PILFERED GRAVESITE. OUTWARDLY BEAUTIFUL, THE IMAGE ALSO ACTS AS THE PERFECT SUMMATION OF CARR'S CONCERNS, BECAUSE IT LITERALLY TWINS THE LIFE OF THE FILM WITH THE DEATH OF THE IMAGE; THERE'S A SAD DUALITY THAT PLAGUES OUR DESIRE TO KEEP LOOKING, AS IT BECOMES CAUGHT UP IN THE INEVITABLE DEMISE OF THE OBJECT. HOWEVER, EVEN THE FILM'S ENDLESS LOOPING ISN'T ENOUGH TO ALLEVIATE THIS WEIGHT OF THE GAZE; IT MERELY WRESTLES IT INTO AN ADAMANT HEADLOCK, WHERE, CONFRONTED WITH THE MIRROR OF ITS DECAY, IT MUST PERSIST, SILENTLY AND WITH GREAT FUTILITY.