

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Mark Lewis's short film, *Black Mirror* at the National Gallery (2011), courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery

Capturing a classic Dutch master in a very modern mirror

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On the eve of the opening of Mark Lewis's exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, we arranged to meet for an hour at the National Gallery in London – a museum that has been his muse in a city where he has been resident, off and on, since 1997. His show, in the town of Eindhoven, will gather 14 recent works by the Canadian artist, who is known for his closely considered short films (usually between four and eight minutes in length) shot either with a stationary lens or with a motion-control camera to produce a gliding, inquisitive gaze.

Most electrifying in the new roundup is a work called *Black Mirror at the National Gallery*, created at the London museum using two sophisticated machines: One holds a circular mirror that swivels and scans and moves forward as it captures the paintings on its reflective surface; the other is a for-the-most-part-unseen dolly that holds Lewis's camera. As the mirror advances through the galleries, the camera retreats, observing as it backs away, and through its lens we catch fleeting glimpses of Flemish masterworks, from *Cognoscenti in a Room Hung With Pictures* (circa 1620) – its subject an ironic delicacy, given that we are in a museum – and Hendrick Avercamp's circular genre

painting *A Winter Scene With Skaters Near a Castle* (1608-09), a picture that Lewis has loved for years, and which inspired this short film.

“It was painted during the mini ice age,” says Lewis when we meet in the galleries, alluding to the cold spell that began in the mid-16th century and lasted 300 years. During this time, the rivers of Northern Europe habitually froze over. “I guess it’s a bit of a Canadian thing when I think about it. With the snow and ice comes a total suspension of boundaries and borders.” All the social classes are blended together in Avercamp’s image of winter sport, he says, from the urban poor to the wealthy burghers in their sumptuous satins and velvets. “It’s a radical transformation, both formally, with the snow unifying everything visually, and also in terms of social relations.”

Once besotted, though, it took five years for Lewis to figure out how to make use of the painting. “I was visiting the studio of the French designer Martin Szekely in Paris,” he told me, “and he had made this round mirror out of polished meteorite stone – it was incredibly heavy, and the reflective quality was just incredible. I started thinking about what would happen if the mirror visited the gallery by itself. What would it look at if it didn’t know anything about art and was just curious – at night when no one was around?”

In Lewis’s film, the black mirror meanders sinuously before finding its beloved: Avercamp’s circular winter scene, with all its sparkling detail. “Of course,” Lewis says, “it is drawn to something it can relate to, something like itself.”

Mark Lewis: Pull Focus is on view at the Van Abbemuseum until Oct. 13. In October, 2014, Lewis will be presenting three new commissioned works at the Louvre in Paris, inspired by works of art in that museum’s permanent collection.

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