

SCIENCE & ART



Mark Lewis,
*Nathan Phillips Square,
A Winter's Night, Skating*
(2009)

MARK LEWIS / MONTI CLARK GALLERY WANGCHONG

Collided, Crashed and Assimilated

Mark Lewis makes art with documentaries

BY ANNETTE MANGAARD

IT'S HIGH NOON and Mark Lewis looks bright and polished in his crisp white shirt standing outside the Canadian Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. Moments later sitting in a tiny alcove surrounded by green hedges, I watch the *vaporettos* speed past on the Grand Canal as Lewis admits to having a bit of a hang-over. He has good reason to be feeling this way having spent the previous evening being *fêted* by some of Canada's most distinguished art crowd. Lewis, a Canadian currently living in London, England is this year's 'chosen' to represent Canada at the prestigious Biennale. The exhibition curated by Commissioner Barbara Fisher, and ably assisted by Deputy Commissioner Natalie Devito, consists of a series of four video installation works.

Walking into the newly renovated Canada Pavilion one is immediately confronted by an installation of four silent, single-screen video projections. The title piece of Lewis's exhibition *Cold Morning* is undeniably a short documentary film. Lewis says he became interested in his subject while shooting the Toronto City Hall skating rink featured as the background in another of his Biennale installation elements. Framed low to the ground, the film follows its protagonist's movements for one long slow shot. The subject

of *Cold Morning* is a man who sleeps outside on a grate, but none the less maintains a daily morning routine of "cleaning house," of carefully and methodically placing his few belongings and thus setting up his version of home.

When questioned about his reasons for documenting this activity, Lewis smiles and says he was intrigued by the pattern of behaviour exhibited by the subject. The viewer in turn might call into question his or her own experiences of 'home' with its issues of ownership and excess consumerism. Was it art? It could easily have been presented as a short documentary. Would the viewer's reaction have been a different one? Perhaps. As an installation, one sees the image repeated and is given time to ponder the artist's meaning. The experience of viewing is different from that of an audience sitting in a darkened theatre. Does this lead to a different interpretation of the work?

Another segment features a young couple whose images have been manipulated with rear screen projection to appear to be skating at Toronto's City Hall. This short film, in which the duo twirl and move past each other with hands held, exemplifies romanticism presented in a classical manner. Filmed as a moving dolly shot, the frame arcs across Toronto's inner city landscape to display the old City Hall, New City Hall, and then a panorama of office towers and

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Mark Lewis, *Back Story* (2009) above, *Cold Morning* (2009) below





Installation view inside the Canadian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2009

PHOTO: JENNIFER WILSON / GALLERY TORONTO

skyscrapers. It is a tribute to the architecture, to the old and the new.

TD Centre 54th Floor, a third segment, is shot from high above ground inside the Toronto Dominion Tower looking down onto a busy street. It's another homage to a venerable Toronto edifice, the Mies van der Rohe designed Toronto Dominion Tower. Filmed from the 54th floor, the camera moves slowly back and forth. Foreground and background connect. Nothing appears to happen but on closer viewing the shadows on the ground slowly shift and grow as the frame dollies. The movement is conventional, formal and might cause the viewer uncertainty as to what they should be watching. Perhaps it's not about the obvious but rather about the hidden, that which is beneath the foreground image.

A fourth segment offered two groups of people having a shouting match in front of a market. In this case the market itself was a rear screen projection. Lewis staged the piece and used a casting agent to ensure that he found the right combination of non-actors to represent the individual characters. The two clusters of people push and shove and harangue each other and, at various points, the men strut and display their machismo. The women—equally passionate—hold them back whilst intermittently jumping into the fray themselves. A dance of short sparring matches ensues in which there is neither winner nor loser. The presentation is theatrical, staged. The round continues while in the background the daily routine of the market goes on.

This year's Biennale opened on June 2nd and that day and into opening week, crowds and line-ups abounded in the Giardini. The Arsenal is a mile-long hangar chockablock with art representing over 50 countries. It seemed to go on forever: art, art and more art, endless art. Large screens were positioned beside the canal, old masters' portraits were projected into gilded pic-

ture frames in darkened rooms, and banks of image walls held shadow projections. Works were either steeped in historical references or reflections and meditations on the future.

While there was little painting and sculpture, media and projections were everywhere. At the British Pavilion a 20-minute film by Steve McQueen was screened to a book-ahead audience of 60 persons per time-slot. People waited for over 30 minutes to enter the Canadian, Scandinavian and the USA Pavilions.

Shawn Gladwell (Australia) presented a series of video installations including his title piece *Maddestmaximus*, which is reminiscent of a scene from the *Mad Max* films trilogy. As a car speeds across the desert shimmering in the noonday sun, Gladwell clambers onto the roof and positions himself arms outstretched—the Antichrist. In another piece, *Apology to Roadkill* (1-6) Gladwell, in black leather with full face black helmet, drives a motorcycle along a highway glistening with mirage-like heat of the Australian outback. He pulls over and approaches a dead body lying by the side of the road. The roadkill is a large kangaroo. Gladwell tenderly sweeps the flies away with a movement not unlike that of a priest giving communion and ever so gently lifts the dead animal and carefully carries it away. This movement is repeated in the ritualistic burial of other victims. In these visual essays the artist plays dual roles of survivor and gladiator who takes over the world. The use of landscape and the hero figure conjures up mythological imagery.

Fiona Tan's (*The Netherlands*) *Rise and Fall* visualizes the passage of time and memory. Two screens, side by side, present an examination of aging and experience as visualized by two women, one young, and one mature. The screens work in sync with coordinated visuals. In one scene a waterfall with cascades of liquid descending over

the horizon appears to mimic the passage of time that rushes by as we age. One screen unapologetically features a mature woman going about her day, sleeping, washing, bathing, and eating alone. This is in contrast with the matching screen wherein a young woman also moves through the day but with much more energy and less apparent reflection. This was one of the few works that was uncompromisingly emotional in its subject matter as it shows the lines and signs of aging naked in the sunlight.

Disorient was another compellingly visual documentary, described by Tan as a Marco Polo travelogue. A visual journey, the film combined documentary footage of Middle Eastern scenarios and everyday occurrences. In one compelling scene, a group of men try to tie a broken car chassis onto the back of a camel, and a bus overloaded with passengers clinging to the rooftop teeters over rock-strewn and potholed dirt roads. The camera roves through a market filled with spices and exotic goods for sale. Fields of brilliant red poppies, men in long robes, thickly woven carpets and ritualistic objects spill out of darkened rooms. Textures and colours abound in this lushly painted landscape with voice-over narration using original text excerpted from *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

Steve McQueen's (*Great Britain*) brilliantly conceived and executed, double-screen piece *Giardini*, uses the British pavilion at the Giardini as its shooting location. A simple idea but what makes it so successful is the stark beauty of the cinematic images. Filmed in soft focus, it is romantic and yet also apocalyptic in its presentation. In the early morning mist a pack of dogs, thin, lean, almost skeletal, rove through the garbage, eating—the picture is blurred but terrifyingly futuristic. It's a mesmerizing image that repeats through-

Mark Lewis outside the Canadian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale



PHOTO: JENNIFER WILSON / GALLERY TORONTO



Steve McQueen, *Giardini* (2009)

out the film. Sometimes it is filmed from another angle or in an extreme close-up. Often it is interspersed with images of a soft night rain falling on darkened streets, empty save for a few lanterns. A drop falling slow motion through the fog-filled air. A man stands alone in the darkness, lifts a cigarette to his lips, and a thin stream of smoke escapes. Sounds are hollow and initially distant. Birds, a loudspeaker, a crowd of people: all can be heard as background noise that slowly builds to a crescendo. It appears like a far-off memory, one that you can't quite put your finger on. There is a decided absence of people, which contributes to the end-of-the-world sensation. The images on the two screens are at times in harmony and in other moments discordant. And then they meet with close-ups of a black man and a white one in separate frames. This is all wrapped up in a beautifully sensual and poetic narrative.

As a sidebar to his Canada Pavilion exhibition, Lewis also screened *Backstory*, a documentary featuring the work of father and son team, Bill Sr. and Bill Jr. Hansard, famous for their rear projection expertise in Hollywood films. Just under an hour in length, the film gives insight and perspective into the history and use of rear projection, which allowed studios to shoot on a set using backgrounds from locations shot around the world. Filmed using a combination of archival and original footage, the movie artfully uses the rear screen technique to demonstrate the technique being described by the characters. It also causes the audience to call into question the nature of reality and the authenticity of the film viewer's experience. *Backstory* is humorous, informative and hugely entertaining, to a great extent because the two central characters were so willing to reveal themselves on camera. *Backstory* also gives the spectator insight into the methods used by Lewis in making his installations.

Mark Lewis's pieces are clearly works of art. They display the use of high artifice and are marked by a 'moment-in-time' physi-

cality. While they're artworks representing Canada at a major Biennale, Lewis's pieces can also be called documentaries. They're part of a growing trend of media-based works that are not traditional video art but more like short documentaries in their appearance.

A fundamental aspect of documentary cinema has been the observation of life and documentation of real events. Now artists, known for their facility to reflect on society, have taken up media as their preferred mode of expression. Due in part to the ease of use attached to new technology, this movement may be creating a renewed interest in documentary cinema, particularly in the disciplines of high art and culture. It is fitting then, that the NFB Ontario region, in the form of Silva Basmajian, as executive producer working with producer Gerry Flahive, participated in the production of Lewis's works.

When questioned about the differences that distinguish documentary from art, Lewis doesn't hesitate before responding with "I think of myself as an artist—that's what I am. I'm a filmmaker, too. I don't think I'm a cinematic person but maybe that's just splitting hairs. I never made any conscious decision to make a film—now of course I make film. I show them in traditional artists' spaces but I see them as films. I try not to have them pretend to be something else. I used to be much more dogmatic and just say that I wasn't interested in the cinematic, but now I don't really care so much about it. Now I just make films that I want to make."

What is most compelling about much of the media installation works presented at the Biennale is that they are NOT video art but short films. Almost all are structured like narratives—not Hollywood style but storytelling nonetheless. Many of the works were shot with a static frame. Camera movement was, for the most part, minimal if at all. The view presented was one of loneliness, alienation and of a world with little human interaction. Set beside

the other nationalities, Mark Lewis's pieces were cooler, more distanced, perhaps more Canadian. After all, Canucks are not known for their overwhelming emotion nor for their heroics. Mark Lewis's work has much in common with another art/film home-grown hero, Atom Egoyan. Lewis speaks of his initial interest in film and in particular rear-screen projection as growing from a fascination with the flatness represented by the image of a 'film inside a film' and of the formal qualities it portrayed.

It's interesting that Lewis's early career was as a stills photographer since his work has about it a stillness, a formal quality that slows each movement and causes the viewer to pause and reflect, in order to discern meaning. That ability to pause, to watch and to re-watch the projection may be the key distinguishing difference between the world of the art gallery or museum as compared to that of the cinema. Visual art is presented in a setting where the architecture and the environment are all carefully chosen to enhance the experience of the viewer. Compare this with the arranged seating, the darkened room, hushed expectancy and carefully controlled pace acquired in the theatre setting. Audiences, given a fleeting series of images rolling by at 24 frames per second rarely have time to reflect on a single image; instead, they concentrate on a series of moments and thoughts as a collective experience.

For those who can't afford the jaunt to Venice, Lewis's work will be screened in Canada at the Toronto International Film Festival this September, proving that the two worlds of visual and media art have collided, crashed and assimilated. In other words, art has become cinema—literally. **POV**

Acclaimed independent filmmaker Annette Mangaard has completed more than 16 films since 1984. Her work, which often merges the disciplines of art and cinema, has been shown on television, in galleries and at festivals and cinemathèques around the world.

-Mangaard, Anette. "Collided, Crashed and Assimilated: Mark Lewis makes art with documentaries," *Point of View 75*, Fall, 2009