

On Intergenerational Time

*Obviously it's symbolic, it works on both levels. I don't want to tell you too much, I don't want to spoil the film... uh, but, I'll just say: ICARUS. Okay? If you know what I mean, great—if you don't, it doesn't matter. But you should probably read more.*¹

Time sneaks up on you in the prairies, which is funny if only because nothing else can. There's an old joke that says you can watch your dog run away for three days there; similarly, though perhaps more benevolently, we might describe it as the only place in the world where you can see a whole train all at once.² The point is that time passes differently. It compresses and expands unlike anywhere else. There's a general sense that, without the rush of city life, without appointments and deadlines, there's simply no meter to time's passage. This is untrue, of course, as the social rule can only follow from a natural one. And on the prairies, rhythm is set by seasons and not by schedules—your calendar trumps your clock. How else could I have spent a quarter of a century there, without even realizing it until I had departed?

I think of this as I watch Jeff Nye's body gyrate and twitch in *Abandon, by the old dirt road*. In the projected world of *Abandon*, we see the artist at a plinth in a virtual studio, endlessly mixing paint without applying any of it directly. Is his solitude the disconnected retreat of the willfully ignorant, or has he transmuted his brush into a wand in order to geomantically pull the very elements from his palette? Neurotic adjustment and calculation-by-feel are the ingredients of his entire performance, and there's no reason detachment and manipulation can't both be indicated by his projected presence.

Locked in an endless, jittery loop in front of his palette, Nye performs for us in stop-motion, the cinematic language of expansive time. Stop-motion is typically reserved for events on a geological scale, for things too grand, too

extensive, too gradual, too planetary for us to perceive properly in so-called “real time” (a construct I began to seriously question thanks to Nye). Indeed, such events need to be compressed temporally for us to even recognize them as events at all... because there are some processes for which we just don't have enough life.

Although we are denied visual access to Nye's painterly act, the paint manages to gradually occupy the two canvases that flank him. It seeps up from below in browns and ochres like rising damp, it drips and flows and smothers and composes. The vaguely architectural forms it comes to describe are soon consumed with new paint, paint of a different colour and a heavier stroke that cannibalizes the older paint. Drastic flashes obliterate stable stairs and earthen platforms; built environments are laid to waste in scenes of fire or of snow. And like the farm house Nye's title suggests, his canvases, too, have been abandoned in the studio and gallery, left to their own development, to grow and mutate in resigned, entropic solitude, and to have images placed upon them by unseen forces.

All the while, disembodied voices of both sexes vibrate up from under us. They propose possibilities for spaces, or rather former spaces, tentatively; their memories have been fragmented both by the passage of time and the mediation of it. Like Nye's body, the voices of the elderly are divorced from a sensible sequential narrative, as bits of architecture and autobiography bubble to the surface unpredictably.

“I don't know where in the heck that chimney was.”

“I think there were a couple of stairs from the kitchen...”

“Bedroom. This is a window... window.”

“I don’t even remember you being there.”

“Do you remember any wallpaper?”

“... And then they moved on.”

This last phrase resonates with me particularly poignantly. It reminds us that narratives of departure must surely find their way into any description of the contemporary rural experience, and that these narratives fall to the next person to tell once the original storyteller has departed. It further proposes that the subject to whom we are listening—and indeed, whose story we are watching—is the one who remained and that the narrative itself is more expansive, more geological, more earth-shifting than a simple re-telling can contain. And so of course we can’t watch it in real time—this is a story we need to hear in distant packets of memory, in a darkened space where time passes differently.

1 *24 Hour Party People*. Dir. Michael Winterbottom. Perfs. Steve Coogan, John Thomson. Film. Revolution Films, 2002.

2 I jotted this down at The Power Plant, in a panel discussion by Toronto’s Book Club. I had thought it was Micah Lexier’s line, but he denies having said it. So I’m happy to steal it from the aether.

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