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Miniatures

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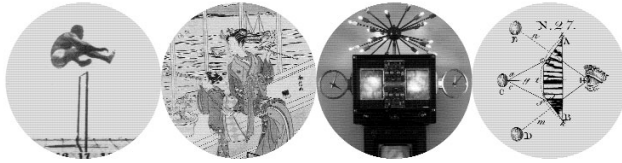
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Miniatures

Steve McQueen, 'Once Upon a Time', South London Gallery, 17 September–7 November 2004

In 1977, NASA sent 115 images – the so-called 'Golden Record' – into space on board the Voyager space probe. They also included greetings in 55 different languages and a number of audio clips, including (amongst others) Beethoven's 5th Symphony and Blind Willie Johnson's *Dark Was the Night*. Projected onto a double-sided, cinema-sized screen, these images – but not the audio clips – are the basis of Steve McQueen's solo show 'Once Upon a Time'. The images range from photographs of children being born to family portraits, the monumental (Jupiter) to the miniature (a leaf), and the poetic (a sunset with birds) to the mechanical (a calibration circle). There are ordnance photographs of the Sinai Peninsula and an intimate portrait of a nursing mother. Ethnographic portraits, perhaps inevitably, feature too and, despite the generally auspicious and upbeat tone of the Golden Record, there are also premonitions of more immediate concerns: a picture of rush-hour traffic in India, for example, and a so-called (and curiously empty) 'modern highway'. Each of these images in 'Once Upon a Time' slowly dissolves into the other, giving an effect that is both nostalgic and reminiscent of a time when such images were indeed seen by some as 'representative' of life on earth – not to mention a time when images dissolving into one another seemed the height of technology.

Seeing the 'Golden Record' in its entirety is a revelation of sorts: you become aware not only of the Utopian idealism underwriting it – an auspicious vision of 'life on Earth' produced by committee in the late 1970s – but also a sense of a time when such idealism (despite the evidence of history) did not seem as out of place as it does today. The original choice of these photographs suggests a number of other paradoxes: chosen for their representativeness they are, needless to say, highly selective. Their purpose, moreover, foreshadows yet another (perhaps more profound) paradox: apart from their ideological and utopian features, they appear to have been selected not so much for extraterrestrial consumption as they were for reception here on earth – a calming lullaby of sorts (complete with a 'once upon a time' refrain)

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Figure 1 Steve McQueen, *Once Upon a Time*, 33 of 116, 2002. Birth. Photo: Wayne Miller © Magnum Photos. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York & Paris and Thomas Dane, London.

designed to make us feel better about life on our planet. There are no images of war for example, nor conflict, nor disease. There are no images of poverty or death either. In choosing this particular selection of archived (and therefore 'definitive') images, McQueen's choice seems to have been defined as much by what has been excluded here as it was by what has been included. As in so many of McQueen's works, it is the notion of limitations – or that which is not seen – and restriction that creates meaning, both on a formal and conceptual level. Whereas limitation is usually associated with a reductiveness of sorts, the exploration of actual limitations here – be they physical, visual, or conceptual – is a productive and interrogative



Figure 2 Steve McQueen, *Once Upon a Time*, 77 of 116, 2002. Supermarket. Photo: Herman Eckermann, NAIC Staff Photographer. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York & Paris and Thomas Dane, London.

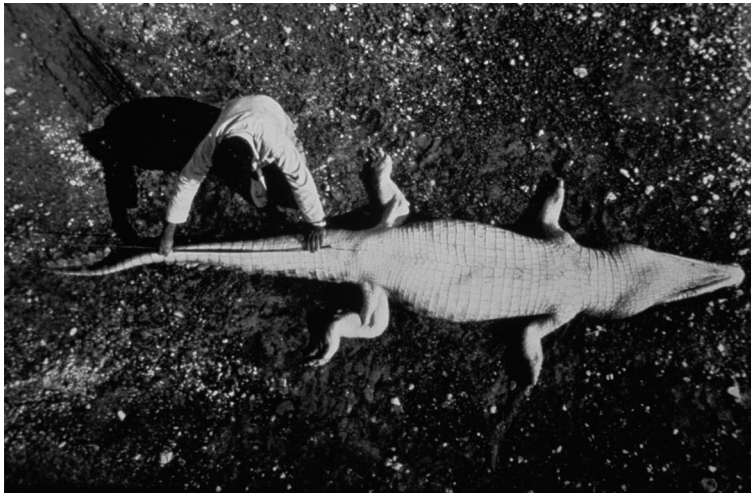


Figure 3 Steve McQueen, *Once Upon a Time*, 57 of 116, 2002. Crocodile. Photo: Peter Beard. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York & Paris and Thomas Dane, London.

component. For all the interstellar distance implied in the original purpose behind these images, *Once Upon a Time* (2004) is about proximity: our representations, in sum, of ourselves to ourselves and what such representations tell us about our aspirations and, perhaps more importantly, our insecurities.

As always in McQueen's work, there are formal issues to be addressed, and a considerable amount of attention (and intention) has been focused on the installation of the work: the gallery has been plushly carpeted and – in the same way that walking from broad daylight into a darkened cinema is unsettling – the overall effect is one of initial unease as the viewer tentatively finds their bearings. To note the physical sense of apprehension is to suggest that this is not about the passive viewing of images as such but is more akin to being confronted with imagery. Whilst *Once Upon a Time* could be no doubt reduced to a political reading – the politics of exclusion, for example, and the 'packaging' of difference that we encounter in these images – there is an abiding sense of, dare I say, hopefulness in this work; a sense that the project of representing life on earth is not so much quixotic as it is imperative if we are to more fully understand how the representational economies operate. 'The question here', McQueen has remarked, 'is how [humanity] is articulated and the humanity that exists in it'.¹ It is a question that provokes another question: how do we re-present differences and multiplicity, not only to 'others' but to ourselves?

The recording that accompanies *Once Upon a Time* is made up of glossolalic voices – people, that is, 'speaking in tongues'. Glossolalia is a fabricated, non-meaningful speech associated with trances and religious fervour, and William J. Samarin – with whom McQueen worked – has observed that when put under scientific scrutiny glossolalia 'turns out to be only a facade of language' and not a 'true' language in itself. Just as the images on board Voyager can be now seen to be a representational facade of sorts, it would appear that these voices are also a facade of meaning – a vessel, not unlike Voyager, for the transmission of ambivalent and paradoxical material. Speaking in tongues is also an apparently improvisational process, a 'taking off' from a particular point in order to arrive, however precariously, at another. There seems to be a corollary here between the voices we hear and the images we see, inasmuch as both are somewhat compromised vessels for communicating that which is perhaps ultimately incommunicable: the multifarious diversity, that is to say, of the world in which we live. It does not necessarily follow, however, and despite the difficulties and compromised nature of such a project, that it is either tautologous or redundant; on the contrary, perhaps the need to re-articulate the Golden Record has never been more immediate – for both ourselves and the others upon whom we predicate that sense of self.

Note

1. Steve McQueen in interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Angeline Schery, in Steve McQueen (2002: 23).

Reference

McQueen, Steve (2002) *Speaking in Tongues*. Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

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PARIP 2005

As yet rather nascent, 'practice as research' remains more complex, more knotty than other, perhaps more conventional, research methodologies within academia. This seems clear. The pursuit, supervision, and review of practice as research at once opens up a number of parameters. And, excitingly, one invariably finds more than an intended discourse or discussion evoked. With the intention of visiting a wide spectrum of practice as research, issues of knowledge formulation and review processes, the Practice As Research In Performance (PARIP) project called its final public event – an international conference in June 2005, at the University of Leeds, UK.

PARIP 2005 was designed to provoke discussion and to trace communications between research and practices performed in varying contexts and locations. Covering nearly all media, and with a concurrent presentation of some emergent works, PARIP exhibited a varied body of scholarship. A strain of interdisciplinarity surfaced recurrently at the conference's panels. One encountered a mix of methods deriving from differing disciplines and evoking disparate discourses, as also the crossings between media – the integration of the moving image within performance, for instance.

In order to explore the extent and possibilities of review processes for practice and encourage alternative formulations towards that direction, the conference very deliberately sought engagement from audiences, chairs and panellists. However, on more than one occasion the limits of review, as it arises in relation to the discursive and disciplinary positions of the reviewers, surfaced. This brought forth the specificities entailed in the review process, showing the pressing need to amalgamate complementary socio-cultural-historical discourses with altering or competing approaches within that process. One instance cut most sharply into this problem. It came from UK-based Bharatanatyam performer Avanthi Meduri, convenor of the Interdisciplinary MA in South Asian Dance Studies at the University of Roehampton. Her piece *What is in a Name?*, is a powerful, historical rendering of key moments in the complicated figure of Bharatanatyam revivalist Rukmini Devi Arundale. The performance drew attention towards the liminality of Rukmini Devi, and a decidedly intercultural, critical-nationalist, as well as a theosophical and feminist discourse was evoked by it. Avanthi's research seeks to resuscitate Rukmini Devi from commonplace