

Emily Richardson

Emily Richardson is a film-maker who is concerned with recording the landscape and its changing nature over time. Interested in issues such as place, space and transformation, Richardson adopts various techniques that detach her work from being a simplistic, objective record of everyday life. In her recent work, 'Petrolia', 2005, Richardson presents a three-screen film installation that depicts the construction of an oil field in the Cromarty Firth, off the North coast of Scotland. 'Petrolia' captures the hive of activity that surrounds the immense drilling platforms and factories that overpower this coastline. Simplistically, 'Petrolia' may be described as being documentary in form, acting as a record of industrial production. However, Richardson's concerns are removed from the pure recording of events, forcing us to explore 'Petrolia' with a more abstract, or aesthetic approach. 'Petrolia' was filmed on 16mm film, using techniques that include time lapse and long exposure. The way in which Richardson has utilised these methods imbue 'Petrolia' with an impelling visual appeal, creating a film that is both stimulating and reflective to the viewer, or as Richardson states, "the image works with that [which is] between the visible and invisible". The graceful movements of the oil rigs as they dance around the sea draw in the viewer. Gliding across the surface like skaters on an ice rink, the drilling platforms become weightless - with any sense of scale or mass becoming removed. The cranes along the coastline act as both observers to this spectacle and also participants, performing in admiration. These products of the industrial world are not impostors, but become unified with the natural landscape.

The soundtrack for 'Petrolia' was created by Benedict Drew, who used purely electronic, computer generated sound. Hovering between silence and background noise, the resulting soundscape intertwines with Richardson's visual[s] to create a combination that is powerfully transfixing. Occasionally, however, there are momentary glitches that cause a lapse in the hypnotic allure of 'Petrolia', serving to remind us that what we are encountering is a carefully constructed fabrication of reality - an acceleration of a process that if watched in real-time would be excruciatingly slow.

Our lives are becoming increasingly obsessed with absorbing information at faster and faster rates. Perhaps due to the increasing amounts of information readily available to us, it has become common nature to absorb things almost instantaneously. Rather than creating an argument of this shift in human nature, Richardson embraces the trend. In fact, this acceleration is a concern that Richardson often explores in her film-making. She states that, "a major motive of my films is to make things visible that are normally not seen because we do not have the patience to look long enough".

By displaying a fluid interaction between the landscape and human production, 'Petrolia' becomes an experience of the infinite characteristics of the natural world. The expansive seascapes of 'Petrolia' create an overall experience that becomes reminiscent of the sublime. Although the composition of 'Petrolia' creates an understated presentation of beauty and visual pleasure, there is an almost intangible uneasiness of darker undercurrents permeating the work. In fact, throughout history, artists that have explored the notion of the sublime have done so with a consideration of the combination of both the beautiful and the terrific. In his 'Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful', Edmund Burke states that, "delightful horror is the most genuine effect, and true test of the sublime". These explorations, perhaps expressed most notably in the paintings of JMW Turner, depict the natural landscape as a site of immense power. For Turner, nature becomes the ultimate destructive force, making any human presence fall into insignificance, with often catastrophic results. In 'Petrolia', however, we are faced with the inverse logic of Turner's powerful depictions - the terror that underlies the film is not one of the possible destructive powers of nature - but rather the destruction of nature itself. At once both harmonious and peaceful, the sea becomes a support mechanism to the massive structures that parade about its surface. However, the drilling rigs that dance before us have been created with the sole task of depleting the Earth's raw materials. Their life is spent parasitically, draining the resources from the same system that grants them their freedom.

What we also bear witness to in 'Petrolia' is the temporary nature of these constructions. In fact, the oil supplies of the coastline where 'Petrolia' was filmed have been predicted to run dry within the next forty years. The huge platforms can only remain functional for a short period of

time. Thus, the visual spectacle that we view in the construction of the oil field in 'Petrolia' becomes inescapably bound to its inevitable redundancy. The graceful spectacle that is played out by the drilling platforms can therefore be seen, in this sense, as a 'Danse Macabre'. Although the seascape is being permanently transformed by the construction of the oil fields, it will survive - the cranes and oil rigs, however, will not. Accepting of the reasons behind their creation, the rigs happily perform before us whilst being fully aware of their imminent destruction. Although soon to become relics, or artefacts, 'Petrolia' presents to us a joyous celebration of some of the last remaining products of the industrial world.

Soundtrack by Benedict Drew. Commissioned by The Lighthouse, Glasgow.