Kelly Richardson

Kelly Richardson's practice frequently revolves around resignifying found footage or imagery, through minor adjustments, so that they can signify the opposite of their intended meanings. The video 'Ferman Drive' is a simple one-minute long tracking shot, taken from the window of a car which eases down the gentle slope of a suburban street. The sedate pace means that we're able to establish that we're in a transatlantic location in the present day, judging from the brands of car and housing styles. But whilst the work's title ostensibly identifies our location precisely, the work itself leaves open whether we're in the suburbs of Minnesota or Mississippi, Tampa Bay or Toronto. Indeed, the implication seems to be we may be in any of them.

If our first seconds of viewing gives one impression of Ferman Drive itself, it's likely to be that it has an almost generic suburbanality. Richardson's documentary-style naturalism make its' freshly painted facades and trimmed lawns begin to resemble an Everystreet, Anytown. As we never encounter any human presence, our attention is also drawn to the particularities of the buildings: scouring the scene for information, we begin to establish some idea about our whereabouts. We're likely to come to at least a few speculative conclusions about Ferman Drive's demographic and socio-economic make-up. We see medium-sized two-car family homes; accordingly we might imagine the occupants are white, middle-income, two-point-four-children families. Although armed with such preconceptions, as the video progresses, the artist still withholds any narrative framework for us to orient ourselves. Lacking any other obvious interpretative starting point, we're likely to interrogate her paraphrasing of cinematic conventions. In mainstream cinema, the tracking shot is usually an introductory device to establish location, or the tenor of forthcoming events. Tracking, or panning shots of whitewashed facades and picket fences are part and parcel of recent cinema's image-repertoire, most often signifying 'wholesome suburbia'. Of the many examples that might spring to mind, 'Ferman Drive' is perhaps most reminiscent of the opening sequence of 'Blue Velvet', where David Lynch makes explicit the convention that white-painted fences and facades act as a visual metaphor for their inhabitants' facades of moral 'whiteness'.

Like in 'Blue Velvet', Richardson wrong-foots us by lulling us into a false sense of security. Having watched the scene from a consistent position and speed for nearly a minute, we register an almost subliminal change of angle. Then, taking us unawares, the house that pulls into view begins to rotate fully through 360'. Frame by frame, all that is solid melts into air. Richardson's alchemical illusion with matter and space renders the scene entrancing yet alarming: it becomes more like an apparition than a documentary. The house itself becomes a phantasmagorical presence, resembling JK Huysmans' description of artists' supposed hyper-sensitive visual faculty, where solid material resembles "blurred infusoria and bizarre protoplasms". And yet the house spins convincingly slowly, as if requiring exertion to move its considerable mass. The ease with which the artist shifts from one register to another – from documentary to magic realism – leaves us uncertain how to 'believe our eyes', let alone how to respond. This impossible, absurd illusion captivates our attention precisely because of how deftly the artist interweaves the wildly improbable with the everyday. As Richardson remarks, "my work is linked by the idea that conflicting sensations coexist in moments which initially appear slight, but are in fact frighteningly loaded. Through my alterations, these few, fleeting moments become simultaneously beautiful but pathetic; absurd yet exhilarating, hilarious yet sad."

Though Richardson's interventions into images may have the lightest of touches, 'Ferman Drive' is the result of an extraordinarily labour-intensive process. The house is not created through computer-generated effects, which rarely have sufficient sense of weight or texture to be wholly convincing. Instead, the artist recreated the house in meticulous detail as a 3D scale model before superimposing still photos over the original footage. The result is that the flow of images becomes genuinely uncanny and alarming. Freud's famous essay on 'The Uncanny' offers several insights into Richardson's modus operandi. For example, for Freud, the uncanny is experienced "when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one" or when there is "uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate, alive or not."

Half horror movie, half child-like flight of the imagination, 'Ferman Drive' also recalls Freud's words that "children do not distinguish at all between living and inanimate objects [or between stories] which take us into the real world or into purely fantastic ones of their own creation." Blurring fact and fantasy, memory and documentary, 'Ferman Drive' echoes Freud's conclusion that the uncanny is experienced when viewing that which is all-too-familiar and domestic: the street is where the artist was raised, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada; and the rotating house her childhood home. For Freud, the uncanny returns us to a child-like state: "everything which strikes us as 'uncanny' touches those residues of animistic mental activity within us… animism, magic, the omnipotence of thoughts, [and] involuntary repetition comprise the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny." Richardson's experiments adapt cinema's mesmerising powers of illusion to highly ambivalent ends. This domestic tragi-comedy, loaded with double-meanings, inspires an inescapably equivocal response. The uncanny, and 'Ferman Drive' elicit "dread" and "fascination" in equal measure. As Richardson observes, it is impossible to read the work as plausible without seeing it as preposterous, to read it as playful and absurd without seeing it as macabre. It is, of course, only thinkable within the domain of art.

Stills from 'Ferman Drive', 2005, single-channel video