



NOW SHOWING

NEW FILM AND VIDEO FROM
THE ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION

ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION AT

**SOUTHBANK
CENTRE**





Luke Fowler, *What You See is Where You're At*, 2001 (detail)



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Midwest*, 2002 (detail)

Now Showing presents a cross section of film and video that allows us to measure the current concerns of artists today who are working in the field of the moving image. The 1990s saw a blossoming of video in exhibitions and the development of certain orthodoxies. Often videos were made to be sampled for a few minutes within the context of a larger exhibition where the audience was predicted to move on quickly to another work. There was also a deliberate lo-fi quality to many works, a reaction to the gloss and surface of television and Hollywood film.

The works in *Now Showing*, however, display a maturity that echoes the growing evolution of the medium in the visual art world. There is a new breadth of ambition, reflected in the broadening scope of the

content of the works in this exhibition. The increasing globalisation of our lives is mirrored in works such as *Otolith* (2003), *The Gates of Damascus* (2005) and *Midwest* (2002). And in technical terms, the filmmakers producing the works have a confidence that suggests they are not merely reacting to other uses of the medium; instead they are using whatever format is best for each work.

One of the most striking things about these works is the knowingness of their makers. The works have been made in an age where the vast repositories of moving image archives have become available digitally and where everything from classic movies to homemade clips jostle for our attention. In Luke Fowler's *What You See is Where You're At*, these archives have

been raided to present a portrait of the 1960s anti-psychiatrist and guru, R.D. Laing. Standard forms of documentary are clearly understood here and the artist plays against them, confounding our expectations. Normally, a documentary will choose a clear stance in regard to its subject. Here, though, Fowler pulls clips from various sources that contradict each other, presenting them with equal weight. Laing famously perceived a kind of wisdom in schizophrenia, giving it value as more than an 'illness'. In building a series of opposing views, Fowler resists conventional hierarchies in much the same way, allowing the presentational mode of the film to embody the principles of its subject, the psychiatrist. At the time of making this work, Fowler had personal experience of orthodox psychiatric care

as he watched his father battle manic depression. The over-reliance on drug therapy in modern psychiatry shocked him and made him more aware of the anti-psychiatric movement, which opposed the elements of medicine that seemed more concerned with social control. His subsequent rejection of conventional documentary strategies seems rooted in this experience.

The *Otolith* Group, too, draw on multiple archival sources, splicing found or historical material with new footage from a visit to Star City in Russia. They build a new narrative that relies on our shared knowledge of the various languages of different film formats – Super 8, video, black-and-white news clips, family photographs, etc. Confident in our ability



Mark Lewis, *Children's Games, Heygate Estate*, 2002 (detail)

to read these formats, they are free to create a complex sci-fi story that points to a potential future while, at the same time, commenting on the current war in Iraq and issues of global feminism, race and cultural history.

This shared knowledge of the languages of film goes beyond the use of archives. Fowler, for instance, is also able to indicate mental confusion and alternative perspectives by using a disruptive editing style that signals a break with the usual conventions. In addition, much of the power of the works of Rosalind Nashashibi and Mark Lewis resides in the familiarity of the landscapes they document. Nashashibi's *Midwest* is at once recognisable as the American urban backdrop we see constantly on television

or in movies. Her lingering, meditative shots, however, allow us to study that landscape in ways we never could before. Likewise, her sense of composition, the rhythm of her editing and her choice of idle moments begin to describe a more diverse, flawed and complicated reality behind the mythic image. In *Children's Games, Heygate Estate*, Mark Lewis navigates the walkways of the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, London, exploring camera angles that variously recall the utopian dream of modernism, its mundane realities and the everyday escapism of games played in overlooked spaces.

Lewis' film functions primarily through its use of formal elements and, indeed, even the children's games along the route have been staged. Viewers are forcefully



Idris Khan, *A Memory ... After Bach's Cello Suites*, 2006 (detail)

drawn into the image as the camera glides through the estate's narrow paths, creating a metaphor for the linear nature of film itself, always moving on. Through this travelling motion, the architecture of the Heygate Estate is animated as a constant stream of images and information, highlighting how we, as viewers, absorb the world around us and what impact it can have on us.

Form is an equally important device for Idris Khan in *A Memory ... After Bach's Cello Suites*, where the documented performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's music emphasises the links between memory, ritual and repetition. The suites were devised by Bach as private finger exercises to be executed daily and Bach's music dwells on the relationship between

form, spiritual worship and discipline. Kahn underlines the intimacy of these issues by adding or deleting in the film according to his own record of the rhythm of his father's movements while he prayed.

In Rosalind Nashashibi's *Midwest*, form is also a driving impulse, though in a much more oblique way. As the rhythm of Nashashibi's work slows down and magnifies our sense of detail, new perceptions emerge. There is time to dwell on the nature of form and gesture, but she is careful to leave the interpretation of these revelations to the viewer.

Mark Boulos addresses the question of what we see in a very different way. *The Gates of Damascus* documents the miraculous through a visit to Myrna



Mark Boulos, *The Gates of Damascus*, 2005 (detail)

Nazzour, a Syrian housewife who receives stigmata at Easter and who has visions of Jesus and Mary. Like Luke Fowler, Boulos resists the objective approach to documentary, refusing to come to his subject with a preconceived judgement. Instead, it remains open and, as a result, we must make our own assessment on what is presented. Compelling us to do this, Boulos also makes us question the relationship between what we see and our own belief systems. What we see appears to depend on what we believe, and a record of actions and events tells us little without an interpretative context.

Boulos, then, points us to one of the most vital elements of film and video. Photography, in all its forms, has always played off the promise of recording what

is really there, in front of the camera. And, almost from its origins, film and photography have found ways to conjure up false images to both deceive and entertain us.

The Otolith Group also touch on such issues in their amalgam of found footage, biography and fiction. The integrity of what is shown in *Otolith* lies not so much in the veracity of the images but in the desires expressed as they are linked together – a sci-fi utopianism beyond earth, a need to escape, a rage at war and a frustration and helplessness in the face of power.

If there is an evolving maturity in these works then perhaps it also reflects the more general landscape of contemporary art today. What is remarkable about this



The Otolith Group, *Otolith*, 2003 (detail)

collection of works is that they move from London to Russia, Syria to Nevada. Their content covers subjects as diverse as Bach, astronaut training, anti-psychiatry, modernist architecture, the Iraq war, the nature of miracles and children's games. At one point in history, many of these subjects would have found a home in television, documentary, narrative film or the music world. Now, as those branches of culture become homogenised, there is less possibility for innovation in those fields. At the same time, the visual art world has broadened the scope of what can be considered within its confines and has become the natural home of experiment.

The range and diversity of the works in *Now Showing* take us beyond video art and

the gallery. The artists represented here also encourages us to look at the longer relationship of art and film, the works of Maya Deren, Joseph Cornell, Walker Evans, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Paul Strand and many others. That history of artists questioning the nature of the moving image is still to be properly addressed but its outlines become clearer when we begin to discern the continued heritage of their investigations in contemporary works.

Francis McKee

Francis McKee is director of CCA Glasgow and director of 2008 Glasgow International festival; he has written extensively on British film and video for over a decade.

