



**Clear**

**Michael Wilson**

There's a point in Nicola Atkinson.Davidson's new video at which the viewer either gets bored and turns away, or relaxes and begins to experience the work as it was intended. That point coincides with the realisation that, while it has a narrative flow of sorts, the beginning, middle and end of the work are not marked by any decisive action. Neither does the gentle musical accompaniment, constructed from a single sample, offer many clues. If it accents certain gestures or patterns of light, the significance of those particular things remains elusive. The same may be said for the ambient sounds of wind and traffic, with only the rhythmic swish of a brush standing out as distinct. This is evidently not a film for the cinema. Rather, it has the neutral feel, if not the grainy, monochrome look, of surveillance footage. The angle of the camera never changes, its subjects appear oblivious.

So, rather than an unfolding drama, what we are presented with here is a situation, a 'moment' extended over a period of time. It can be watched from beginning to end quite easily, but this is by no means a prerequisite for its appreciation. It can also, of course, be watched more than once, and while this may well prove rewarding in the way that any act of observation may, it will not reveal any buried symbols or other 'hidden' keys to meaning. What is happening here is in fact quite shockingly ordinary, framed by the camera lens

and monitor screen and subtly inflected by the silent and unseen presence of the artist, but otherwise unmanipulated and undramatic.

Nevertheless, there are elements not apparent in the footage itself that have the potential to affect our understanding of the action. One is a knowledge of Atkinson.Davidson's established predilection for 'entering' situations while striving to avoid the ethical and artistic pitfalls of voyeurism. She sets up her camera without permission or explanation, remains for a while, then packs up and leaves. She never announces her intentions, but nor does she seek to hide or disguise them. This straightforwardness of method reflects her aim for renewed simplicity and directness in her practice as a whole, especially where it intersects with the public realm. Hence 'Clear.'

Another piece of information that skews our reading of the video's central image is the fact that the people seen maintaining the house do not live there. They are an immigrant family who, while they look very much at ease, spend most of their time elsewhere. Thus the space of the video is not just physical but ideational; corresponding with the home we can see is another that we can only imagine. The one we are presented with looks well-appointed, expensive, with a large car parked outside; the workers' seems unlikely to be quite the same. But the dialogue implied is about more than just economic inequality; it is concerned too with the assumptions we make based on visual evidence alone, and about place and property, public and private in a broader and more complex sense.

Artists are more inclined than most to romanticise childhood, jealous of the unencumbered freedom to dream and play that it seems to offer. Yet while the young girl in Atkinson.Davidson's video has one foot in a parallel world of her own, the other drags behind. It is all too easy to see the shadows of the adult world falling over her skipping, twirling, restless figure. We find ourselves prompted to ask ourselves questions about her position in her family, her

community, her society, her time. She straddles, as does the scene as a whole, visible and invisible realms.

If the action of the adults in Atkinson.Davidson's video is centred around keeping nature at bay, the substance of her watercolours is frequently quite the opposite. Simple shapes suspended against clean white and pastel-tinted grounds, they suggest firing neurones, wriggling spermatozoa, cells, nerves and veins. Amoebae, or more precisely the semi-permeable membranes in which they are wrapped, become signifiers of the flow of roles and ideas within, beyond and through existing boundaries. Sometimes elements of landscape appear, at others the tendency is towards pure abstraction, reflecting an uncomplicated delight in mark-making. There are decorative patterns and calligraphic flourishes, fields and flares of pure colour. One might think of them as mental maps, wiring diagrams to subconscious circuitry, or cosmic mugshots, sketches of heavenly bodies and mysterious deep space phenomena. There is a logic at work here, but it is decidedly fuzzy, organic, wilful. Extropy and entropy coexist.

The juxtaposition of painting, especially in such a traditionally genteel medium, with digital video is an unexpected one. The two aesthetics are divergent, even jarring, yet also make a certain kind of sense together here. Landscape is the conventional watercolourist's genre of choice, and Atkinson.Davidson's video is certainly a landscape of sorts, (one that is, as Moria Jeffrey writes, "reminiscent of the golden age of Dutch painting"). For their part, the watercolours have something of a cartoonish look, suggesting movement by evoking the style of abstract animation in the manner of John and Faith Hubley's Benny Carter and Lionel Hampton-scored short *Adventures of an* \* from 1957. The two media share a certain immediacy; video with its capacity for hands-free documentation, watercolour with its gestural fluidity and lightness.

In 1993, Nicola Atkinson.Davidson arrived as a stranger in Glasgow looking for a way to understand something about the composition of her community and to find a place for herself within it. The method that she finally arrived at, in a project titled *Lost And Found*, involved transforming several hundred borrowed teaspoons and buttons into a chandelier and a water tower, before returning each item to its owner. Ten years on, *Clear* marks another new arrival, in New York, and another reappraisal of her relationship to the ideas of ownership and occupancy. The fact that it is the first project in a newly converted interior (PilotSpace was previously a meatpacking cooler) only adds to its resonance. Start here.

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