

Alien Landscape: Hypnotic vignettes captivate in Scenes
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Creative Loafing

Cinema has a great tradition of indulging formalist fiddlers and aesthetic troublemakers who have questioned the medium's dry fixation with storytelling and spectacle. But in recent years, film seems to have dropped the theoretical ball as the art world has taken proprietary interest in avant-garde experimentation. Video and film art are the current artsy craftsy hot property: Matthew Barney's Cremaster series, Jane and Louise Wilson. Sam Taylor-Wood, Doug Aitken. Rodney Graham and Gillian Wearing have proven that if one desires cutting-edge investigations of space, duration and narrative, one must get thee to the nearest gallery rather than the local art-house theater.

In keeping with that change of guard, Atlanta avant-gardist Oliver Smith's appropriationist video *Scenes From a Scene* screens on multiple dates at the alternative arts space, Eyedrum. In *Scenes*, Smith applies his hypnotic distortions to five films, including *Nanook of the North* (1922), *David and Lisa* (1962), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), *Pandora's Box* (1928) and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, (1966).

Smith shatters the illusory pull of film, whose conventions lure us unquestioning and slack-jawed into its fictional web, by distorting and slowing down to a snail's pace key scenes from these films. Setting these vignettes to an otherworldly sound track of icy metallic pulses, *Scenes From a Scene* reconfigures world of the familiar into a dystopian, sinister alien terrain.

A definite chill of menace bangs in the air and Smith's choice of clips -featuring confrontations, disturbing sexual couplings, murder, torture are rendered doubly disturbing by a wavering ambient, electronic score suggesting the most minimalist of Sonic Youth distortion or the eerie ricochets of heavy machinery clattering inside an enormous warehouse.

In a scene from *David and Lisa*, a girl enters a room and ever so slowly raises an accusing finger at a boy, forcing him back into a corner. In an excerpt from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a petrified looking John Hurt is lured more to his doom than desire when a woman lifts her skirt and Smith's soundtrack goes shriekingly haywire. Such vignettes thus give the distinct impression of Smith's interest in the diseased and disturbing aspects of human relationships.

As the video progresses, Smith's editing grows increasingly distorted and grainy, as if the quicklime despair and futility of his human couplings was decomposing his film. By the appearance of Bergman's *Persona*, whose existential self-flagellation is sampled in the film's final shot, *Scenes* has morphed into alternating shades of sepia and blue, and tiny points of light play on its characters' skin, as if their atomic composition had blushed to the surface.

The groundwork for films like Smith's was laid by the structuralist filmmakers and quirky avant-gardists of the '60s, including Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Jack Smith, Hollis Frampton and Andy Warhol, whose films such as *Empire* - an eight hour shot of the Empire State Building in real time - typified such experiments with the duration of film and our expectation of space and time subjugated to story. Smith's narcotic dreamcrawl *Scenes From a Scene* continues in that '60s formalist tradition of filmmakers' radically scrutinizing film convention. Such films also speak to a larger truth in life, of how in its "normal" progress, we become immune to the subtleties of its operation. Pricking the bubble of "reality" - a flimsy notion if ever there was one, since cinema's time and space is as removed from reality as an ice cream cone is from Antarctica - Smith presents the cinematic landscape as an alien topography of strange desires and graphic disconnection.

As Smith's haunting clip of a frozen ocean as viscous and thickly flowing as mud from *Nanook of the North* shows, the film world is an otherworldly place filled with creatures like, but unlike, us ... places familiar, yet, unfamiliar. In Smith's hands, the film world is rendered as distant and ethereal as the surface of the Moon, ultimately questioning whether we know this place at all.