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Focus: Corin Sworn

Early 20th-century literary characterization; imagination, action and agency

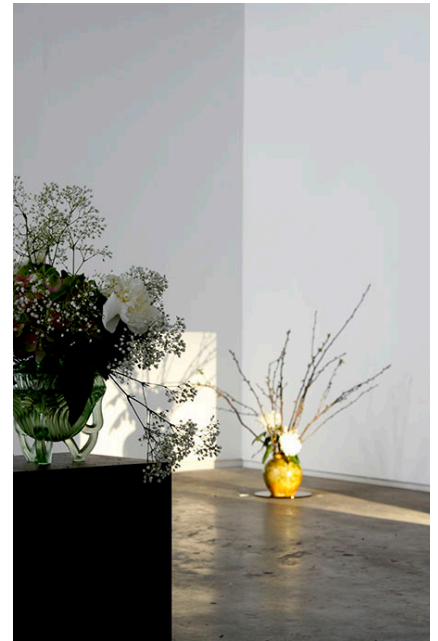
Corin Sworn lives and works in Glasgow, UK. In 2011 she had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; Timespan Museum and Arts Centre, Helmsdale, UK; and 'Art Now', Tate Britain, London, UK. This year she has exhibitions at the Western Front, Vancouver; Kendall Koppe, Glasgow; and she has a forthcoming solo exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 2013.

Corin Sworn's videos, installations and drawings address ways in which human subjectivity is woven into overarching social trends and specific cultural forms. Her works are loaded with references to late 19th-century World's Fairs, early 20th-century experimental schooling and dystopian Hollywood movies. Rather than fetishizing these as objects of nostalgia, she seeks to show how each opens (or closes) space for imagination, action and agency. Sworn, who was raised in Canada and now lives in Glasgow, initially studied psychology at university. She changed tack after noting that her chosen subject's statistical methods tended to reduce individual choice to data that frequently cancels out alternative behavioural choices. Against the normative techniques of the social sciences, her approach creates a space for thought's tributaries, eddies and counter-flows.

In her video *The Lens Prism* (2010), an actor delivers a fragmented soliloquy about memory and the nature of images directly to the camera. If the mode is confessional, it soon becomes apparent that he is an untrustworthy guide to these subjects, as his identity switches between personae adopted from real and fictional characters including the unnamed male protagonist of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), the poet-novelist Raymond Roussel, and an academic, whose pronouncements echo those of geographer-theorist Kevin Hetherington, author of *Capitalism's Eye: Cultural Spaces of the Commodity* (2007). None of the characters are announced or identified in the film, so we must infer their origins from hints and clues (for example, we might guess the Marker reference from a description of the pier at Orly). While each scene

About this article

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Temporal Arrangements, 2010, era specific vases, floral arrangements and slide projector

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appears to bear little or no relationship to its antecedent, The Lens Prism's unifying idea is that distraction is a modern condition that is prefigured by innovations in forms of cultural display – from photography to modern exhibition architecture.

In the first of *The Lens Prism's* sequences, our unstable protagonist announces that he is thinking of a photograph. He snapped this, he claims, several years ago outside a museum, and it depicts a bust of a man who is sculpting a figure of another man, who is fighting a tiger. Retrieving the photograph, he admits his error: the sculpture was, in fact, of a 'Pan-like creature, seated on a globe, an elephant in one hand, a knife in the other'. How can he have got it so laughably wrong? No answer is given; we move on instead to other personalities. He tells us he has just published a book, for which he commissioned illustrations that act as 'just another diversion' (from his descriptions, we can infer this to be Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa*, 1932). Next, in the Hetherington-inspired sequence on the 1889 World's Fair, he suggests that its vast scale (and equally expansive catalogue) forced viewers to 'adopt an alert, fractured form of attention – flipping, grazing, browsing'. This work might be seen as a platform for Sworn's ongoing interest in literary characterization. She is currently developing a video based around Susan Sontag's introduction to *A Barthes Reader* (1983), in which she plans to explore how the voices of the two authors interweave and play against one another.



The Rules, 2007, silkscreen on paper

Digression is also fundamental to *Endless Renovation* (2010), an installation and slide projection shown at Washington Garcia in Glasgow. Sworn found the slides – around 600 of them – in a skip near to her studio, and set about creating an audio narrative in which she seemingly analyses the mundane scenes of (amongst other things) the corners of rooms, light fittings and potted plants. Touching on Vilém Flusser’s phenomenology, Charles Bernstein’s poetry, and Richard Linklater’s film *Dazed and Confused* (1993), the fusillade of references are overwhelming. The argument is hard to follow, as the spoken texts are appropriated from an array of sources (like the slides, they are found, and thus communicate nothing directly attributable to the artist’s life). The installation’s artifice is

doubled by the use of another projector, which casts a shadow of a nearby vase and flower arrangement – a nod towards the disruption of cinematic spectacle in expanded cinema practices (Malcolm Le Grice's *Horror Film*, 1971, comes to mind).

Also based on appropriated imagery, *After School Special* (2009) owes its fragmented layering to both YouTube mash-ups and the preoccupation with youth culture in the cinema of Jean Cocteau and Jean-Luc Godard. Using footage almost exclusively culled from the movie *Over the Edge* (1979) – a sensationalist story of teenage rebellion in which a youthful Matt Dillon and his cohorts terrorize a newly built town – Sworn's video is an attempt to wrest lyrical intelligence from the original's sensationalist nihilism. Sworn over-dubbed the characters' voices with adult speech, creating a truly disquieting experience in which prepubescent boys conspire in a masculine bass, frequently segueing into fragmented poetry or social analysis. *After School Special* presents an inverted version of the original movie, giving voice to a more hopeful vision of youth who are able to critique their society rather than simply raze it to the ground.

Sworn's concern with childhood's potential is most evident in a series of drawings and sculptures first exhibited at Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2008. *The Rules* (2007) is a re-imagining of the 'rules' of Summerhill, an independent boarding school founded in Suffolk in 1921 by the educationalist Alexander Sutherland Neill, where children have co-management of the school. Alarming, the document announces that 'swords are to be inspected by staff', and that students are not allowed 'sticks with nails in them'. (In fact, the 'rules' have never quite existed in this form, and are continuously re-written by the students). Sworn's work suggests that freedom exists between rebellion and the structures we impose on ourselves. We can also infer that while cultural institutions mould our minds, we might in turn control and shape them in order to re-make ourselves.

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