

# Picture This

Time Unfolding  
by Lucy Reynolds  
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**This essay was commissioned specially for the Time Unfolding DVD and looks at Picture This' relationship with the artists it commissions.**

Picture This has been producing film and video work with artists since 1991, the organisation was formed as a coalition between the resources and membership of the Bristol Film Workshop and Watershed video department. From these beginnings, rooted in the ethics of the film workshop movements of the 1970s and 80s, Picture This has established itself as a commissioning organisation with an ambitious programme of national and international reach. Facilities now encompass a residency studio and an atelier space from which to show the diverse range of installation based film and video work to the public, produced through the commissioning programme. These developments reflect the wider welcome developments in the reception of film and video as an art medium over the past decade. Encouraged as much by technological advances in digital media as by a shift in perception from audiences and funders alike, film and video are now an accepted part of art practice and an expected part of many gallery visits.

Picture This has amassed an impressive back catalogue of works since the organisation's workshop beginnings. The supportive structure of the commissioning process is reflected in the instinctual and individual dialogues that it has elicited between artist and subject; employing strategies of performance, provocative and direct encounters with the public, or more nuanced explorations of place. Whilst approaches may differ, common to all of the commissions is a sense of receptiveness to unpredicted moments and connections that might occur during initial research and the ensuing filmmaking process. That these connections disrupt the process in productive and interesting ways, and draw forth unexpected narratives, becomes an implicit part of the works featured here.

Collaboration, through its unpredictable and participatory nature, can provide a fruitful way for artists to challenge or enhance their own working processes by engagement with others outside their usual sphere of reference.

art + power is a collective of artists with disabilities whose intense consensual process

unfolds into a moving exploration of identity. In *This River Winding* the stories and images of personal dreams, desires and uncertainties contribute to a free form animated narrative shaped by the metaphor of the river Severn. By contrast the element of collaboration in Dryden Goodwin's film *Reveal* takes unpredictable occurrences and interactions with the public as its premise. In the spirit of the pavement artist, Goodwin approaches strangers in public spaces asking them if he can draw their portrait. However, the camera does not frame the relationship between artist and sitter, but focuses entirely on the drawing process itself, from which a portrait of the off-screen subject slowly emerges. Goodwin's subject as a photographic 'truth' is never on camera, what is revealed instead is the fragmentary nature of representation, reliant here on Goodwin's drawing unfolding in time, and the snatches of conversation between himself and his arbitrary subject. Just as Goodwin might playfully measure himself as an artist against his ability to render a likeness, so Sarah Miles takes the measure of her practice through the tropes and fictions of Hollywood. Her films exist in the uncertain space between documentation of real lives and a cinematic imaginary, in which ensemble casts are gathered from a network of friends and family who play out their resemblance to fictional counterparts. In the case of *Magnificent Ray* this transformation extends to place, as the Dorset town of Bridport becomes the one horse town of a Hollywood Western. The town's inhabitants are the stars of a fragmented narrative rich with the signifiers of the wild west: it's shoot outs, saloons and cowboy hats. But *Magnificent Ray* is not a pastiche of Hollywood. Rather, Hollywood enables Miles to frame a profound portrait of a small West Country town, where the invitation to collaborate in the fictions of the Western allows it's townspeople to reveal something of themselves.

Like *Magnificent Ray*, Michael Curran's film *I Can See My Way Home* also shows a fascination with the suggestive nature of place. In this case the echo of the Victorian novel or the horror film are embodied in the dereliction and melancholy of Poltimore House, a ruined mansion near Exeter. Potent with the histories of the South West, what was once a symbol of privilege is now shuttered and empty, vandalised and blackened by fire. Curran engages with these fictional and historical narratives through a performative act of breaking and entering. His flickering torch is all that illuminates the details of the shuttered interior, as it moves through the darkened rooms. But rather than a sense of trespass, the presence of the wavering torchlight suggests a stirring of the memories locked in the rich sediment of the house's history, and a singular act of mourning for a vanishing cultural landmark.

Miles' quotation of the Western genre, and Curran's evocation of the horror film exemplify the ways in which artists have defined and explored their practice in relation

to the dominant industry of Hollywood. In his disquieting pantomime of Mammy, the ubiquitous black maid of countless Hollywood spectacles, Harold Offeh combines critique with humour. Offeh's *Being Mammy* emerged as a result of the artist's exploration of archive, memory and ethnography, particularly in relation to the time he spent in the archive at the Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Film and Popular Culture at the University of Exeter. Using the strategies of an earlier generation of video artists, Offeh enacts the gestures of this potent symbol of slavery, as Mammy's exaggerated tics and gestures highlight cinema's culpable role in creating and maintaining a racial caricature. Balances of power are also explored in Monika Oechsler's short film *The Chase*. The circular structure of a running track provides the arena not only for a display of sporting competitiveness but also for a study of the ambiguous line between the rules and codes of behaviour in sport and those between the sexes.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the couple who pace the circular track are adversaries or running partners, and whilst *The Chase* could be seen as a metaphor for gendered power relations where the female runner is pursued in an increasingly violent game of catch, it is never quite clear whether this is playful or predatory.

Despite the refinement of the digital medium, artists continue to explore the medium of film, most often using the 16mm gauge associated with documentary and experimental film practice. This should not be seen as a retrograde step, but as a sign that celluloid is still a potent medium through which to explore the possibilities of the moving image and the apparatus of cinema. The filmmakers Emily Wardill and Rosalind Nashashibi are notable examples of artists who draw new meaning from film. The sense of ambiguity and temporal displacement engendered by Emily Wardill's *Sick Serena and Dregs and Wreck and Wreck* issues from its clash of cultural references and inventive manipulation of film language. Switches between time as movement and time frozen as still photograph, parallel the film's referential jolts between the flow of historical and current time. Thus references to Christianity signified by the stained glass saints of a cathedral window metamorphose into living manifestations, whose use of vernacular dress and dialogue makes an uneasy transition from their frozen glass counterparts.

In *Bachelor Machines Part 1*, a lyrical observation of the contained world of an Italian cargo ship at sea and that of its all male incumbents, the curious state of simultaneous movement and stillness experienced on a ship is suggested in the long stretches of slow time for which the crew sit, wait and talk, contrasted by the periods of intense activity as they go about their duties.

At the same time, the sense of endless motion is caught and counter-pointed in the

static frame of the camera, which records a sea and ship in continuous movement whilst remaining paradoxically still, a paradigm for cinema's own condition, and a poetic reminder of the fundamental instability of vision.

Whilst the subject matter explored within these Picture This commissions are diverse, all reveal an engagement outside expected frames of reference. This is not to suggest that the works featured do not have an autobiographical element, indeed the artist sometimes becomes an integral part of the work: draughtsman, trespasser or Hollywood maid. Furthermore, the formal and thematic concerns which have occupied each artist in previous works continue to surface: a fascination with sporting rules in *The Chase*, for example, or the iconography of Hollywood in *Magnificent Ray*. But what becomes strikingly apparent is the extent to which these artists have used the commissioning process as an opportunity to explore new territories, extending or challenging their practice through an investigative act of encounter with place and people. Whether this unfolds in the context of Emily Wardill's residency at Picture This, Offeh's time spent at the Bill Douglas archive or Nashashibi's cargo ship voyage, what results are thoughtful and provocative records of experiences both unexpected and unpredicted.

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Lucy Reynolds is a writer, artist and independent film programmer and Content Manager for Luxonline, whose doctorate research explores British expanded cinema. She has curated numerous screenings of artists film and video and her recent film programme, *Describing Form*, exploring the relationship between film and sculpture, has toured museums and galleries across Britain, from Tate Britain to Spacex, Exeter and the Henry Moore Institute.

Recent publications include 'Margaret Tait: The Marks of Time' in *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader*, 'Found Footage Film: The World in Fragments' in *Ghostings: The Role of the Archive in Contemporary Artists Film and Video* and 'Filmaktion: New Directions in Film Art' for *Centre of the Creative Universe: Liverpool and the Avant-Garde*, Tate Liverpool.

She teaches the history and theory of film, specialising in artists moving image, at the University of Westminster and Birkbeck College.

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Time Unfolding - a DVD and online micro-site - is a curated selection of film and video works commissioned and produced by Picture This 2000 - 2007.