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**CIRCA**

STEPHEN BROOMER: CLOSED POSITIONS

## CIRCA NOW

CIRCA works with contemporary artists to exhibit selected works under the programme CIRCA NOW. This series aims to examine and expand notions of what *photo-based* can mean in the image-teeming terrains of our times.

STEPHEN BROOMER: CLOSED POSITIONS is a show of fitting firsts: Broomer is the first artist to have a solo exhibition at CIRCA and this is Broomer's first solo exhibition. More importantly, though, Broomer's work as a filmmaker, photographer and preservationist contributes many turns to our ongoing conversation about the transmuting tensions between film and video, analogue and digital, positions and practices. The recurring use of superimposition in Broomer's work is an echo of the way in which we experience layer upon layer of meanings when we reflect on his overlapping practices. Experiencing his photography series *Closed Positions* alongside the 16mm looping projection of *Jenny Haniver* in the gallery, we are faced with another form of superimposition: Still against moving. Moving against still. Film against film. Grain against grain.

iloks/swell

Exhibition: December 5, 2015 - February 5, 2016

This exhibition is generously supported by The Liason of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT).



## AT THE EDGE OF THE VIDEO SIGNAL: STEPHEN BROOMER'S CLOSED POSITIONS

Stephen Broomer's lens-based hybrids - derived from both his own images and various found sources - renovate structures through carefully considered, densely layered filtration processes. Bridging the distance between analog and digital, Broomer incises his frames with a panoply of moving-image artifacts, resurrecting and beautifying otherwise forgotten architectures.

Broomer's *Closed Positions* photo series arranges stills extracted from a found, manipulated analog "How to Waltz" video. The decayed exposures stratify formally-dressed dancers as they sashay through indesignate limbo-spaces in pink, cyan and orange partnerships. Their repeated forms both inhabit and embody the frame, echoing what has just happened and revealing what is yet to come.

Within these images is the institution of the waltz - the early nineteenth-century equivalent to what we now know as internet dating. With the popularization of this dance, a series of succinct, preliminary terms for the sizing-up of a romantic partner emerged. Relationships evolved and fizzled on the ballroom floor with the success or failure of the dance. Attention to form in the waltz is paramount, so much so that the changing of partners mid-song is prohibited. Partners must be evenly matched in practice and expertise, lest they lose their momentum and fall out of step.

The limitations of analog video are oddly similar to the intrinsic rules of the waltz. Analog video manipulation involves the compromising of a video signal's stability, with only a limited window that allows for degradation of the image before the signal fails. It requires that the artist employ repeatable, predictable strategies in the pursuit of what can only ever be fleeting and unexpected results. The most stunning analog video artifacts are always the most short-lived, teetering dangerously at the precipice of signal failure. Unpredictably, the image evolves within this tenuous

narrow space, just as quickly as a romance sparks or terminates between waltz dancers within the brief duration of a song.

*Closed Positions* cleverly mines tensions between figure and form within the unlikely framework of the manipulated analog video waltz. Beginnings and endings are removed in all manifestations, be they in relation to the source video, the song or the exchange between partners. The composition and arrangement within the panels alludes to the frame-by-frame, time-based source material, yet omits any discernable sequence. The stills eliminate the purposeful momentum of the bodies, creating an omnipresence that infinitely locks partners, desiring or otherwise.

Embedding process within the frame, Stephen Broomer's image-making practice generates new, unified surfaces that synthesize incomplete, disparate elements into ageless hybrid structures. His *Closed Positions* series frames the figure through concentric lenses, situating the body in states of tender, eternal preparedness for the end of the dance, at the edge of the video signal.

### Christine Lucy Latimer



## JENNY HANIVER: LONG LIVE THE NEW FLESH

*You came in out of the night  
And there were flowers in your hand,  
Now you will come out of a confusion of people,  
Out of a turmoil of speech about you.  
Ezra Pound*

In Stephen Broomer's *Jenny Haniver*, a masterfully enigmatic portrait of women, the very last sequence shows a girl waking up. But instead of suggesting that the previous cinematic storm was a product of her subconscious (just as the traditional narrative procedure goes), the film urges us to take the opposite direction, to see its densely abstract imagery as a new type of materialist realism. The direct observation and the personal emotions about what's being captured merge into a single unstable, and to a certain degree uncontrollable, visual landscape.

According to Broomer, his film-portrait-in-textures incorporates an array of chemical and handmade visual techniques -such as mordancage, reticulation, scratching, etching- as well as a digital intermediate process, which combine to "mirror its namesake, which is a fetish object sold in the ports of Antwerp since the sixteenth century, a ray or skate carved into the shape of an angel or a demon, originally named a 'jeune d'Anvers' (young girl of Antwerp), gradually transformed through linguistic variation to Jenny Haniver."

The result of this concept-driven liaison between chance and control constitutes a critical study on the mutative nature of film circa 2014 (a new realness emerged from the collision of photography and animation, some would say), and on the representation of women, in the clichés of delicate beauty and natural forms constructed by the male gaze.



However, the transcendental power of *Jenny Haniver* - of its ability to criticize many different "sacred" things at once without ever relying on discourse (nor sound) - has to do with the fact that both its technical and gender criticism appear to have been triumphantly sublimated onto the level of the form. Which is to say that the film's overwhelming abstract aspect should not be interpreted as a mere plastic achievement but rather as a pure aesthetic concern.

Like many of Broomer's singular kinetic works, *Jenny Haniver* stands as a bridge between traditions of both artistic thought and production. A lyrical reflection coming from within the film illuminates the conceptual ground and obliterates the borders between the analog and the digital realms to achieve a hybrid composition, a synthesis of Broomer's creative vision. It is precisely this interconnecting paradox - of film and video, artisanal and professional, reason and passion, form and content, old and new - that positions *Jenny Haniver* in the higher grounds of a contemporary territory, engaged in the regard of History as the driving force to keep pushing always a bit further into the unseen.

Pablo Marín

## IN AND ABOUT THE FIGURE

The Canadian has long been trained to understand space by way of the landscape vista, and the Canadian landscape, as Wyndham Lewis once wrote, has imposed upon our psyche for its vastness, this "monstrous, empty habitat" which dominates a land where human presences are but a small speck in the throng of plains, rivers, and tree shadows on hard earth.<sup>1</sup> The first popular movement of Canadian modernism, signaled by the work of the Group of Seven, broke through the dead Dutch styles that had crowded the homes of the nation's art patrons. Critics did not know how to respond; some made charges of incompetence, aimed at the Post-Impressionist style long since established in Europe, in which the landscape was not merely rendered by oils, but was at once vision and oil. Decades later, as Canada, infinite habitat, became site and theme to its late modern artists, vision broadened from the landscape to other subjects, such as the figure, as in the graphic, serial forms of walking women, mid stride.

In my filmmaking since 2010, I have been concerned with landscape, personal vision, and abstraction. The central figure bearing upon that work is the body that moves the camera, and the scenes that are cast are rarely peopled, but bear the mark of human presences in built environments, in faint traces of action. Rather than deal in characters or the human form, these films trade primarily in rhythm and colour. Almost all have been set against the geography of Toronto, where I was born and have lived for the past thirty-one years.

In 2013, I became interested in working with the figure. This began with *Championship*, a 16mm film assembled from more than 30 home movies covering various bouts of a high school wrestling tournament, each one shot from a fixed perspective, the white and black gym mats rapidly swapping compositions in alternating sets of three frames. This strategy causes the wrestlers' contorting bodies to undergo spatial displacement, with the ever-interchanging combatants locked in a struggle that is somehow separate from the ground they occupy.<sup>2</sup> The films that compose *Championship* were found in an estate sale, and subsequently altered through editing and other

acts of layering and rephotography. The figure, in this instance, was borrowed. It could easily become iconic and symbolic, or be reduced to graphic form.

*Closed Positions* is an open series presently comprised of seven prints. Across the seven prints, the bodies of two dancers, tinted to pastel colours, become multiple, interacting with their own doubles. As with *Championship*, the root images are found materials: they are taken from a video of a community television broadcast, in which the male host demonstrates a number of waltzes for the camera, with a silent female partner. In the source, there is only male and female, no crowded room of dancers; my interference, with superimpositions and tint, has made a solitary education into a more social occasion. These are scenes of salutations; coupling embraces; and the alienation of the lone figure. Further cast upon the image are abstract forms, from painted motion blurs that I have photographed on 16mm film.<sup>3</sup> These eruptions serve to disperse light across the compositions, at times obscuring the images by blockage or burnout, always conditioning the video's artificial colour palette. This series continues the mission of *Championship* in still another sense: the dancers, borrowed from a found signal, become iconic, and into them I pour my experience, refiguring their ossifying expressions and gestures to take on a new dimension, a new liveliness.<sup>4</sup>

To construct such new dimensions out of borrowed figures is a purely aesthetic act, but to make images of friends, lovers, family, is to play Pygmalion. The image is mere shadow, and by the ephemeral nature of the image, it begs our wariness. The live body breathes, beats, throbs, and sweats; the photograph tastes of fix, of death. Those who have invested a lifetime exploring the body in art have often contrived a thematic purpose or purposes for the body; in avant-garde cinema we have witnessed the vital body, the ill body, the sacred and profane body, bodies that destroy and create still other bodies. Whose cheek do you stroke when you stroke a face made stone by the camera, jailed in a frame? Not man's, but memory's.

*Jenny Haniver* is a film of portraits taken between 2002 and 2014. It takes its title from a cryptid totem sold for centuries at the docks of Antwerp: a Jenny Haniver, or jeune d'Anvers (young girl of Antwerp),

is a disfigured ray or skate carcass, carved to resemble an angel, a devil, a dragon.<sup>5</sup> In the film, a series of ten portraits are subject to all manner of alteration. By this they compose the hull of a ship wrecked on rocks sung by sirens. To mirror its namesake, the film's plastic properties have been carved, lacerated, bleached, otherwise stressed, reshaped to transform reality to the fantastic and unknowable. With this work, I am not only transforming scenes of human subjects, but am transforming a total record of my own photography of human subjects up to the date of its completion: the film ends with the first scene of a figure that I ever took, as a student in 2002, begins with the first image of a person that I took after I resumed my filmmaking career in 2010, and in between are portraits taken in the two years of its production. It therefore encloses my contemporary work with my origins. All subjects are women, to match the analogue of the title and to allow the work to extend its reflection to the history of portraiture, to the myth of Galatea.

The central action of this work may seem, on its surface, to be violent and destructive. In this it takes after Wolf Vostell's concept of the *décollage*, portions of the image stripped away by bleach, ground by steel wool, peeled up by mordantage. I see the damage wrought to the image not in terms of decay and destruction, but as an act of pure creation. It does no harm to the subject to augment these images; all that is changed is the representation, which diverges and remains its own distinct presence. In *Jenny Haniver*, forms are resilient; the figures prevail through abstraction and emerge intact, marked only in memory by their torn and veiled doubles, much as the Jenny Hanivers sold on the docks of Antwerp remain both skate and nightmare, and the modern landscape is at once both vision and oil.

Stephen Broomer

<sup>1</sup> Wyndham Lewis, "Canadian Nature and its Painters", *The Listener*, 29 August 1946.

<sup>2</sup> I came by this technique, of 'tri-frame alternation', in watching Owen Land's *Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour* (1975). In Land's film, by the virtue of his subjects (a document of meetings between Jesus Freaks and traditional Baptist youth), the effect of spatial displacement achieves a profound spiritual dimension.

<sup>3</sup> The material used to create this effect is footage from *Landform 1* (2015), the first in a series of abstract films that combine motion blurs, paint, and digital augmentation.

<sup>4</sup> A similar effect is achieved in *Wild Currents* (2015), likewise made with found materials, in this case an educational film on the dangers of electrical shock, in which the child actors of the original film are recast as ghosts, in an afterlife where their home is ever mutating.

<sup>5</sup> Only after finishing the film did I come across Hollis Frampton's late photographic series *ADSVMS* (1982), a series of "autographic likenesses" of animal and plant life, in which a Jenny Haniver is featured as "IV. CHIMAERA (*Challorhynchus capensis*)". Frampton's notion of the photograph as keepsake and double, the photograph as an act of embalming that becomes a thing all its own, wholly separate from its subject, complements my approach to Jenny Haniver, of the photographic representation as an independent object, one formed of resemblance, metaphor, analogy, and its own objecthood, its own presence.