

THOSE ARE PEARLS THAT WERE HIS EYES

Ariana Reines

Bill Morrison: *High Water*
New Paintings and Films
Maya Stendhal Gallery
October 6-29 2005

*

In the big glass house, still dripping, children in mourning looked at the marvelous pictures.

-Rimbaud, "After the Deluge"

*

The figure of the solitary man upon the water may not seem as ubiquitously American as, say, the cowboy riding off into the sunset, but both images invoke the mythos of the solitary soul contending with Nature, or other transcendent enormities. In the watery masterworks of the American canon—the paintings of Winslow Homer, of Albert Pinkham Ryder, in the oceanic mythmaking of Abstract Expressionism, the roiling prose of Herman Melville, water is a gorgeous and tenebrous unknown, beautiful, terrible, and untamable. That oceanic figurations stand for divine mystery, generally Christian, goes practically without saying. Nowadays, whatever of nature has not been put to use by technology has expired, its vestiges cultivated as *a valuable natural resource* or protected on *wildlife preserves*. Long ago in olden times, ocean was the vast surface upon which the faith and mettle of a solitary American soul were tested. Oceans in paint swell and foam in awe before the Earth's ferocity and clemency, its mercurial mysteries, but these seascapes also surge up into—or circumnavigate—the Hubris that very notion of sea incites in us (Pollock's "Full Fathom Five"). The old way was to understand the watery wilderness was as the terrainless terrain of humanity's acutest test. If a man wanted to learn what he was made of, down to the very ore of his faith in God or his human mettle, he would go to sea. He would go to encounter adventure, casting his destiny into and against the surging tides, forging a soul—or losing it—by riding the surface of the deep.

Bill Morrison is cinema's poet of decay: he gives substance, in his films, to the erosiveness of time: light itself liquefies, dancing upon the surface of rotting celluloid. Water as a subject seems natural for him: if light could have solidity or substance, it would be water, which seems not merely to reflect light, but to contain it, to disgorge it. That water is politic goes without saying: it always has been. (HIGH WATER's politico is Mussolini in the film short "Il Duce", a funny, fascist dumb show.) This past year began in the aftermath of Tsunamis in southeast Asia and now groans toward its close in the wake of yet more watery disaster—(natural, which is to say inhuman disaster, yes, but perhaps worse, the long unmentioned disaster, whether natural or not, of our very human inheritance: the criminal racism of both our nation and our government coupled with our technological Hubris in the face of our fragile, violent, *only* planet.) Perhaps the terror era has entered its diluvian phase. There is no question, though, that the planet itself—and not just its warring human populace—is all shook up. The ballistics of earthquakes and terrorist explosions are earthy; the planet's watery insurgency is not just a demonstration of the awesome power of nature as nature, but of the fact that we've polluted it and are forgetting how to live *with*, if not *in* nature. An age of unnatural natural disaster. Have we even begun to mourn what has been lost in these

disasters? Have we begun to enumerate our culpabilities? Might a state of mourning be our new state of residence, a backward-looking melancholy our new climate, supplanting, at least for now, the derring-do that got us here in the first place? Might our new terrain be a little more amphibious, a climate of ebb and flow rather than pinnacle and bedrock, a terrain whose moving surface is made as much of what we are as what time carries away from us?

In Bill Morrison's new paintings, there is no sky. Shifting from the American Masters' navigatory figurations--the temperament of the sky was something to steer by, and was the domain of a just, if angry, God--Morrison paints a man alone in a boat surrounded by water--a vague enormity. "You can't get there from here," as salty Mainers say, but there's no telling if there is any there there, or here for that matter, in Morrison's paintings. They are adrift. He lays the paint on thick and bright in a loose hand that rejoices of its material--in one painting, a swath of bent back is dewed and marvelously fleshy, like a Soutine ray. These aren't the paintings one would necessarily expect from him-- they look in no way spooked or haunted, with no nighted color to cast off. But something like a warning seems to loom over them. The lonely boatman looks a lot like Bill Morrison, shirtless, bright and ruddy and paleish in fat gobbets of light, fumbling with the outboard or sitting still, inert in the sunlight.

There's no motor in painting, of course--it's not cinema, it doesn't move, it's on a different kind of Time. The figure of the "Excursion" paintings is at once the eternal man alone at sea, a lonesome and hardly fearsome Ahab, and a pink jewel in the jewel of the ocean, aglow in the thick light of paint. Light doesn't care what happens to him and water doesn't care either; the man might as well be a mere carbuncle upon the rippling world. This is not a cunning navigator, a steel-jawed seaman like Winslow Homer's manly men in foul weather gear. This is guy is lonely on a skiff in a climate of ocean, ocean with no direction, no map, no *Christ*. A man half naked and alone upon the water is a figuration of vulnerability, which could also be honesty, of naked humanity, the humble courage that is *faith*. Does Morrison believe? Do we? Winslow Homer's boatmen are *men at work*--they are what we see of them--flinty, noble, experienced. And let us not forget the sharks and roiling sea in "Kissing Moon", with Homer's hard flanks and iron walls of water, shark shanks like some primordial knife fight, colder, much colder, than anything we see in Morrison's painting. Darker. Wetter. The world of Homer's nocturnes is more akin to the gorgeous seasickness of Morrison's short film "How to Pray", in which waves crash against and slaver over the womanly bosoms and haunches of an iceberg, calling to mind the crowning event of maritime Hubris--the Titanic. Bill Morrison's man at sea is on an *excursion*--a weekend sea jaunt, for the fun of it, and yet he is without a single tether to connect him to the identity that might create or construct him when he's on land. He is hairless and softish, oarless, without so much as a visor or tube of zinc cream to protect him. Pinking in the gooey sunlight. Is there something heroic in his solitude, or are we looking at postmodernism's funnyish bunglings with Hubris--a middle aged white guy at sea alone, and he can't even get the motor running... This isn't an American adventure story. It is lonely, bright, and eerily calm. Filled with foreboding in a space oddly detached from time.

Narcissus dies of hunger gazing at his reflection in the water. There is a longing in us, when we look out to sea, to glimpse some shard of a reflection of ourselves, some sign that we are *of* that vastness, not only in our marine origins, but something of the way we are now, some kind of verity that could be beautiful enough to make us admire at least a glimmer of our humanness, if not our humanity. Narcissus is part of the nature of cinema too--for all of its fancy, for all of the mysterious estrangements of its eye, the art of the moving picture is reflective, an entrancing beauty that seems real, so real that we might fall in love with its simulacra, ignoring the real around us.

Bill Morrison has shown us the liquid lusciousness of decay. So what is cinema in the face of all this water? A kind of vault for the beautiful poetry of extinction? Or something more like a nature preserve, a repository for earthly residues, where magnificent oddments go out to pasture to huddle a little and gasp their last nitrous gasps? One looks to the sea for origins, one gets from the sea mythology. The birth of cinema is hardly as remote as Genesis or Homer, Gilgamesh or Ovid. But cinema is, has, its own myths. The world that offers itself to us in Bill Morrison's films is estranged and remote, and yet, every now and again, under the weird patina of grey upon grey shot through with white

light, slowed down, the tassel of a bugle waves in the wind just as it would in any wind, a man cracks a timeless smile and though his outfit is antique, and he is surely dead, he could be anywhere, he could be one of us. The ambivalence in Morrison's romance with archival cinema is a beautiful ambivalence; it is tragic. Once upon a time the camera seemed to promise a kind of permanence, an omniscience that could be redemptive, that could close the book on certain age-old questions, that could do more than merely *signify*. That could *prove*. That could solve the problem of time passing. But we know the story. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Not a single mystery has been closed thanks to the camera. Estrangements rose up all around the supposedly documentary innovation, estrangements in good and evil faith both.

What is the power of cinema in the face of its wastes—its unfathomable beauty, and the mystery of how it preserves traces of life, simultaneously altering what it preserves? The river as metaphor for time is an old story (Heraclites). A river, because it flows in one direction, was said to be like time, which of course did the same, or so we thought. But what if Time itself could breathe in and out, as on a tide? What if it could gather and surge, a malleable thing, like an ocean, that is, not a thread or flow in one direction but as its own deep and churning self, crashing against itself, receding into itself, and swelling up now and again, cancerous, lost in its own upsurge? The sea doesn't just flow, it overclimbs itself. Dilates and contracts and dilates. Could time, too, be this way?

Bill Morrison's cinema is made of "millions of facts of distributed light"¹: it is prosopopaeic, elegiac, almost too exquisite to be believed. There has always been plenty of water in his films. Their splendor is made of a glimmering, hypnotic slowness, edited to neominimalist music by Bill Frisell, David Lang, and Michael Gordon. Perhaps it will seem frivolous to say so, but the kind of sepulchral beauty in *Gotham*, in "How to Pray", in "Before I Enter" are the "Mothlight", the Blanches Dubois of our time—fragile emanations from the past that are frankly doomed, and heartbreaking. These images incised in nitrate and rot, shimmering like embers upon the surface of film—one is awed and delighted that Morrison has rescued them from the archives, but they're kind of scary. Scarily seductive. These dancing images are the walking dead. You get the eerie, disembodied, refractive feeling you are looking at ghosts, which of course, you are. Even his color video shorts, "Leaves" and "Bird and Rock" deal with death and the infinite complexity of light. "Outerborough", "Light is Calling", and "The Film of Her", with which audiences are perhaps familiar, are mesmerizing dream machines. This is haunted filmmaking.

"Gotham – Part 1", from a Ridge Theatre work that was performed at Carnegie Hall in 2004, opens with the unhurried progress of a flock of sheep across Central Park as evening falls, while automobiles zip by in the background. The great modernist poet Guillaume Apollinaire, in his anthemic poem of urbanity and acceleration, "Zone" (1913), cast the Eiffel tower as a shepherd to a herd of bridges covered in automobiles traffic, the cars bleating like sheep. Never has it been so clear how much early automobiles resemble fast-moving sheep. Do these animals mind the intrusions of urbanity that flickering and whizzing around them? The street lamps, the cars, the camera? The buildings hung in the distance? They don't seem to. The strangeness of a pastoral scene punctuated by park benches, buildings, and cars, gives way to a shot of the Manhattan skyline, overhung in streaming white clouds, and then crossed by black tugboat smoke. A man washes and washes a filthy window, as if he could ever clean it of the accretions and deposits of passing time. Three buglers, rigid as smokestacks on an ocean steamer, upright as architecture, sound the soundless fanfare of the age of skyscrapers. These men, hard and narrow as the pinnacle at the bottom of the screen, give way, little by little, to footage of building construction which obliterates the sea. The film ends in a subverted cheeriness that is somehow terrifying—back in Central Park, a benevolent-looking man takes a lamb in his arms, kisses it, and smiles.

¹ John Ashbery, *Rivers and Mountains*

“Before I Enter” and “How to Pray”, two short films from the Ridge Theatre project, SHELTER², are masterpieces of *unheimlichkeit*, the more or less untranslatable German word for the Uncanny, or, literally *unhomeliness*. In “Before I Enter”, a beautiful constellation of illuminated raindrops or foxed film stock twinkles around two figures at the edge of a surging sea. It looks like a New England Hurricane about seventy years ago. The film’s livid reverence is buoyed by the a capella of David Lang and Diane Artman’s austere music and text. The ocean is willful, surging onto land instead of wreaking havoc where it is meant to, that is, at sea, overflowing itself on vintage celluloid just as it does today. SHELTER calls us to think about what many of us have perhaps been fortunate enough not to think about—that is, what is a house? Can a house really protect us? Do we give enough thanks and reverence to our homes? We don’t usually make our way home wondering whether we’ll drown in bed, or do we? Should we? Do we give our faith over to the false cover of the state rather than keeping it in reverence and humility before the nature itself? In “Before I Enter”, women make a show of shoveling water away from the doorsteps of their flooded houses—they are like the looped window washer in “Gotham” who will never get his window clean of time. Water has no time, time has no time, that is, it doesn’t know itself, or care. Morrison’s cinema feels timeless too. The footage may be antique, but the flood scenes are as new as anything. So much has changed. Nothing has. There are two kinds of prayer in High Water. There is the prayer of reverent thanks and awe before the extreme delicacy and force of earthly beauty which, though fugitive, is exquisite and infinite in its mystery. The other kind of prayer is the prayer of a soul in terror of perdition, a prayer for safe conduct. An SOS.

² SHELTER will be performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theatre November 16-19.