

At Sea

Works by Stephanie Barber, Peter Hutton, and matthew swiezynski

Sunday, December 14, 2007 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

curated and presented by Jennifer Blaylock

“...the cruelty of the sea, its relentlessness and awfulness, rushed upon me. Life had become cheap and tawdry, a beastly and inarticulate thing, a soulless stirring of the ooze and slime. I held on to the weather rail, close by the shrouds, and gazed out across the desolate foaming waves to the low-lying fog-banks that hid San Francisco and the California coast. Rain-squalls were driving in between, and I could scarcely see the fog. And this strange vessel, with its terrible men, pressed under by wind and sea and ever leaping up and out, was heading away into the south-west, into the great and lonely Pacific expanse.” (Jack London, *The Sea Wolf*)

the invisible art of memory—the magic hour number 1 (2007) by matthew swiezynski; digital video, b&w, sound, DVD from the maker

photographed at the marin headlands, california

music source: j.s bach and church bells

dwarfs the sea (2007) by Stephanie Barber; digital video, b&w, sound, 5 minutes, tape from the maker

small biographies and musing generalizations—men’s relations to each other and their lives. there is hope and loneliness, companionship and isolation and the simplest of filmic elements to contrast the complexity of human emotions. the delicacy of the formalist writing moves the listener from intimacy to universalism and back again, swaying gently to and fro like the rocking of a ship. (Stephanie Barber)

At Sea (2004–07) by Peter Hutton; 16mm, color, silent, 60 minutes, print from the maker

“Recently I returned from my first visit to the Toronto International Film Festival and there is one film that I can’t shake free from crew: *At Sea*.

“25 words or less... ‘Well, it’s about a boat being built, a boat in service, and ends with a boat being taken apart in the third world. Oh yeah, it’s silent’.

“*At Sea* is a sixty-minute silent film, silent and slow. The film is broken in to 3 sections: birth, life, death. The film opens BIG (very big) with a static shot of the top of an enormous ship strung up as if by the strings of some Daewoo puppet master. Hutton’s camera routinely rests from a distance taking in the enormity of the endeavor that we, the viewers, have the fortunate opportunity to absorb: shipbuilding. Hutton lingers long enough for us to take it all in, the length of each take allowing the mind to wander. In this introductory section we not only learn the effort required to construct a ship but the effort required to view a film in which one must participate, not simply watch passively.

“Hutton was once a seaman an experience which, thankfully for viewers of his film, never shook free from his imagination. Initially Hutton traveled to Bangladesh to document the process of ship breaking, an act incredibly dangerous to both the folks collecting their paltry wages and to the environment in which they labor. Due to the latter issue Hutton was only able to get 3 hours worth of shooting time with the ship breaking. The bossman feared that the 16mm camera was owned by Greenpeace, an interruption that caused Hutton to set out on an entirely different film.

“There are moments when Hutton’s camera gazes are ineffable; Hutton doesn’t dictate our feelings or thoughts to us, giving the unique opportunity to engage in this document in a present tense. When he introduced the picture he forgave in advance those who chose to nap. I, for one, did not nap though I did shut my eyes ever so briefly in the 2nd part (at sea) during a long take of the rolling sea; when I re-opened them the sea was still rolling over and over, undulating, unfinished, never done until... cut, his roll of film ran out. While his film is in essence a documentary it is unusual in that its constructed purely of long takes without any sound at all: no environmental sound to take us away from the image in front of us, no musical cues to guide our emotions. All we have is the image, edits of these images and our choice as to how we will cope with this staggering amount of time that passes across the screen.

“After experiencing mankind’s ability to create such a monstrosity once it’s at sea the camera is locked on to a wide shot of many cargo boxes. I couldn’t help but begin to become concerned with what all those cargo boxes contain. Perhaps some of them are full of grain and other essentials but more than likely they contain garbage that will be consumed and tossed out on to the trash heap, just like the ship that carries them.

“*At Sea* is a 60 minute motion picture postcard that delivered an experience distinct in the cinema a un-tethered, by the constraints of conventional story-telling, look at commerce and its consequences.” (Tim Massett, “Peter Hutton’s *At Sea*,” *Notes from a No Name*: nfanb.blogspot.com/2007/09/peter-huttons-at-sea.html)