

Darkest Americana and Elsewhere

Film, Video & Words by James Benning

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presented in association with
the Film Studies Program at the University of San Francisco
and the Exploratorium's Cinema Arts Program

Since the early 1970s, James Benning has created a body of formally innovative, long-form film works which use duration, understated camera work and (at times) elliptical narrative to examine cultural assumptions and contradictions with American culture and history, often revealing darkness or ideological conflict lurking beneath the surfaces of everyday appearances. A filmmaker committed to navigating his own deeply ambivalent relationship with American culture and history, Benning's works explore the intersections of landscape, history and ideology as elegant monuments to contemplation and the passage of time. This three-program series presents two early films, his first foray into digital video and a detailed artist presentation that trace these threads in Benning's work. (Steve Polta & Jonathan Marlow)

Darkest Americana and Elsewhere: Film, Video and Words of James Benning

Program IV

Milwaukee to Lincoln, Montana

Sunday, February 28 at 3 pm — McBean Theatre at the Exploratorium

James Benning In Person

The figure of the artist, explorer or philosopher working in contemplative isolation figures prominently in the American narrative. In 2007 and 2008, in an act of private contemplation of this archetype, James Benning constructed replicas of two famous sites of this tradition: the cabin of Henry David Thoreau—built in 1845 at Walden Pond—and contemporary radical environmentalist Theodore Kaczynski's cabin near Lincoln, Montana. Imagining these figures as the idealistic alpha and nihilistic omega of the American hermetic philosophical tradition, Benning will discuss this project as the centerpiece of an autobiographical presentation that characterizes the evolution of his own work and thought as an artist endeavoring to balance the introspective impulse with the urgencies of social engagement. (Steve Polta)

***From Milwaukee to Lincoln, Montana* by James Benning**

“From July, 2007 to January, 2008, and April to June, 2008, James Benning constructed replicas of two cabins that have played pivotal roles in American history. The first is an exact reproduction of the cabin Henry David Thoreau built at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts in 1845. It was there that Thoreau wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. He later published *Walden* in 1854 which discussed his experiences living in the cabin and describes his primary values of self-sufficiency, simple living, and his loyalty to transcendentalist philosophy.

“He wrote in *Walden*, 1854: ‘I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.’

“The second structure is a reproduction of Ted Kaczynski’s cabin he built in the Lincoln, Montana woods and where he was eventually arrested, after a lengthy and expensive FBI investigation, for his part in a deadly bombing campaign. Similarly to Thoreau, he had moved to the rugged, remote cabin in 1971 to learn self-sufficiency and survival skills after becoming disillusioned with mainstream society. He apparently began his sending his mail bombs after watching the wilderness around his cabin destroyed to make way for development, seeing violence as the only solution to the ills of what he called ‘industrial civilization’” He amassed an impressive library at the cabin which Benning has replicated in large part as well. Kaczynski is currently serving a life prison sentence in Colorado, without the possibility of parole. [For a] full list of the books, papers, and maps seized from Kaczynski’s cabin see www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/tedkbooks1.html.

“In an interview with *Earth First!*, Kaczynski stated: ‘The real revolutionaries should separate themselves from the reformers... And I think that it would be good if a conscious effort was being made to get as many people as possible introduced to the wilderness. In a general way, I think what has to be done is not to try and convince or persuade the majority of people that we are right, as much as try to increase tensions in society to the point where things start to break down. To create a situation where people get uncomfortable enough that they’re going to rebel. So the question is how do you increase those tensions?’ [“Interview with Ted Kaczynski, Administrative Maximum Facility Prison, Florence, Colorado, USA,” *Earth First! Journal*, June 1999.]

“[...] Benning’s cabin replicas, a long-term project carried out primarily in isolation, [...] refer to the ‘loneliness’ of [these] other ‘projects:’ the life’s work of Henry David Thoreau and Ted Kaczynski. When viewed side-by-side, these three projects raise major questions surrounding the production of work in isolation and outside of mainstream society. In conversation, Benning has addressed the conundrum of the loneliness in working alone, in wanting to be separate from society, yet missing the social aspect. [What] drives artists, thinkers, and writers to isolate themselves and, in extreme cases, to turn their backs on society completely? At what point does an iconoclast become a sociopath?” (Katie Hood Morgan, “Cabin Project.” <http://cabinproject.tumblr.com/>)

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