

Paul Clipson/Zachary Watkins

Black Field

Thursday, December 14, 2017 at 7:30 pm — The Kanbar Forum, The Exploratorium
presented in association with The Exploratorium

The films of Paul Clipson offer viewers glimpses into alternate worlds, referencing lived spaces and familiar landscapes made shockingly uncanny through Clipson's masterful rendering of light and color through elaborate use of superimposition and visual abstraction. Deeply influenced by the delicately devotional cinema of Nathaniel Dorsky (among others), Clipson's films express a similarly luminous worldview entirely his own. In his solo work as well as with the collaborative duo Black Spirituals, sound artist Zachary Watkins explores tone, resonance and the social implications of sound, both in terms of collaborative relationships as well as audience experience—sound as restoration, sound as healing. Frequently working site specifically or with environmental field recordings, Watkins' sound work functions similarly to Clipson's film work in creating experiential environments allowing renewed awareness of the familiar. As we conclude the year 2017, San Francisco Cinematheque and The Exploratorium are proud to present the World Premiere of *Black Field*, an original, long-form (70 minute) commissioned film/performance collaboration by Clipson and Watkins to be projected in glistening 16mm, sonically diffused across the majestic multi-channel sound system of The Exploratorium's Kanbar Forum. (Steve Polta, San Francisco Cinematheque)

Black Field (2017) by Paul Clipson & Zachary Watkins; 16mm, color, 70 minutes, print from the makers

Paul Clipson's cinema is one of eternal recurrence. Subjects continually repeat themselves: bridges, buildings, fences, metal gratings, trains, airplanes, trees, suns, leaves, grass, eyes, hands, mouths, silhouetted figures walking on shorelines, puddles in concrete pathways, power lines, neon signage and blinking night-time lights, and water—lots of water. Beads of water on leaves, pools in puddles in concrete, waves crashing against beaches, raindrops falling on glass. These subjects are revisited again and again, sometimes to the exclusion of all else beyond their mirror-like realities. Clipson is unafraid to draw continually upon this basic set of prime subjects, which are linked in their capacity as otherworldly thresholds, their shimmering reflections and dynamic edges transforming material reality into the vibration of light. Such transformations are common to the model of cinema, which takes up the appearances of the world into a dynamic temporal flux of montage, yet Clipson's primary concern is not alluding to the properties of cinema, but rather to the properties of perception itself. Even within a given film, the same objects reappear, passing into frame, passing out, and passing into frame again—a carousel of attractions. This structure is again repeated at the level of the shot, as the meter of Clipson's films are set by short bursts, often no more than a few seconds at a time, with the filmstrip then rewound in camera and exposed again, rewound again and exposed again, a process that offers infinite and unending potential for iterations. Each object thus comes into visible presence in a multiple capacity, producing spaces where things are both the same and not-same: in each instance a subject is encountered freshly, made anew through the dynamic force of handheld camera movement, through the rhythm of its execution in temporal montage, and its juxtaposition with other subjects through the layering of superimpositions. Water is water, until it is suddenly melting away the hard edges of buildings and bridges, until it is a texture behind the darkened shadow of a fence, until it is crashing onshore in an explosion of particles of sunlight that sends the outline of a human figure into a vortex. Then, it is no longer mere substance—it becomes process.

Clipson's films are among the clearest articulations since Brakhage of how vision is formed through process—how sight is not a passive and inert function, but equally shapes the world just as it is shaped by it. By probing the universe in its closest detail, often through a macro lens, Clipson shows us again and again how to 'make it new' through the act of seeing with one's own eyes—directed at any ordinary object such as a leaf, a bead of water, a rusted bottle cap, a cigarette butt—each moment an occasion for wonder in how an object's edges are formed, how it relates to and is produced by its environment, how it comes into and out of presence. He never appears to pre-compose the contents of his frame, choosing instead to follow the traces he finds on his journeys. In Clipson's films, we begin to understand objects as events operating in slow motion. Things are broken down into their constituent shapes: that light is really an orb, that fence is really a grid whose negative space forms a tesseract, that puddle in the road is really a

portal that leaks into another dimension. The camera is a layer of the body, a perceptual apparatus that acts in union with the surfaces of the world, as the body does. It does not separate us from what is external, but instead dissolves boundaries of internal/external by joining inner and outer realms in an act of union forged through sight. Through his lens and constant overwriting of images, Clipson reconstitutes vision in a fashion similar to the Ancient Greek concept of extramission, in which the seer beholds the world through rays that extend from the eye to the object. In this model, the viewer is bound up with the world in a tactile embrace, without the possibility of distance required to be distinct from what is observed, to be a passive spectator. This is a basic reality of quantum mechanics that a metaphysics based on the primacy of substance (a view from which the Western tradition has been built) cannot admit—yet this framework is one that process philosophy has no quarrel with whatsoever. It is a truth that our fragmented modern culture has not fully come to terms with—we live predominantly within mediated relations that promote the passive model of vision, that repress the necessity of our visual labour except through approved forms of consumption that maintain our isolation in order to sell aspects of ourselves back to us—but this truth is as old as time. As the third Mahāvākya of the Upanishads tells us, *tat tvam asi*—“thou art that” (or, “you’re it”). The answers are simple enough for all to see, the only thing required is to unlearn enough false ideas.

In our world, space as an external phenomenon has been charted to exhaustion—Clipson gestures to this again and again in his landscapes, with their buildings, bridges, fences, and power lines that intersect the skies, waters and other natural forms. Various mapped coordinates, roads, and property lines demarcate the geography of the modern world and the boundaries and potentials for sight; there are few fresh territories left to explore. But just as Vico saw descriptive language as the weakest form of language, a form which triumphs only in the final stage of his model of cyclical history before giving way to a *ricorso*, in Clipson’s films we see the edges of these markers blurring and eroding: the buildings are suddenly underwater, the city fences are turned into occasions for hypnotic trance. We are looking at the films with eyes open and yet what we see is an inner space, a space that is everywhere and nowhere. The spaces of Clipson’s films are spaces of internal bodily perception. (Dan Browne: “Cinema for the inner eye: On the films of Paul Clipson.” www.sfcinematheque.org/blog-article/cinema-for-the-inner-eye-on-the-films-of-paul-clipson)

Paul Clipson is a San Francisco-based filmmaker who often collaborates with sound artists and musicians on films, live performances and installations. His work has been exhibited and performed both nationally and internationally at such festivals as the New York Film Festival, Edinburgh Film Festival and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. His films aim to bring to light subconscious visual preoccupations that reveal themselves while working in a stream of consciousness manner, combining densely layered, in-camera edited studies of figurative and abstract environments, in a process that encourages unplanned-for results, responding to and conversing with the temporal qualities of musical composition and live performance. www.withinmirrors.org

Zachary James Watkins: My art investigates the rich area of resonance and is dependent on collaboration with practitioners in all disciplines. Works attempt to manipulate experiences and immerse the senses bringing to the fore natural phenomenon. I believe that sound can heal and that the conscious investigation of harmonic tunings, acoustic resonance as well as social relationships can yield powerful experiences. Therefore, sound works often begin with the exploration of pure interval relationships for resonant systems. These tunings investigate whole number pitch ratios known as just intonation. I create tunings based on desires to explore new harmonic territory, periodicity, composite waveforms, resonance and texture. It is my affinity for rich timbres that informs many aspects of my music. I explore the harmonic series, live electronics, site-specific resonant spaces and the spatial diffusion of sound to achieve rich, saturated environments. I prefer to work site specifically, observing the acoustic properties of a space and shaping new works around these perceived phenomenon. www.zacharyjameswatkins.com

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www.exploratorium.edu/arts/cinema-arts