

Art in America

OCTOBER 2013

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Jordan Baseman:
Deadness (detail),
2013, multiple 35mm
slide projections,
36 minutes; at Matt's.

JORDAN BASEMAN

Matt's

Whereas commercial feature films encourage the viewer's suspension of disbelief, photographic and filmic art—at least since the Conceptualism of the 1960s—has been intent on frustrating our ability to succumb to illusion. The deconstructive impulse has even become a default mode for artists. Jordan Baseman's film *The Last Walk* (2011) is self-reflexively deconstructive in that it re-questions many assumptions—such as the linear unity of filmic image and soundtrack, or that any narrative can be filmed—that Conceptual art and Structuralist filmmaking of the 1960s were predicated on questioning. It also features a voiceover narration by the early British Conceptual artist Stuart Brisley.

Brisley tells us that, while out walking his dog, he discovers a man sitting at the edge of a field, engulfed by flames. He summons help, and his panic is met by lurid curiosity: "Somebody's burning? Where?" Horror, mediated, has become spectacle. Listening to Brisley's voice in a dark room, we watch a projection of abstract images pulsing and streaming. In fact, these are Christmas lights suspended in the branches of winter trees, but they are difficult to differentiate from the glitches produced by the film's processing. This ambiguity implies the impossibility of representing the horror of Brisley's narrative. That the pulsing lights and forking branch forms might resemble blurred flames—at least when the viewer is prompted by the narrative—only emphasizes the "failure" of the images to convincingly depict, and the resistance of the story to being depicted.

The narrative of the *The Last Walk* resembles a gothic horror story, to which the film's spookily deliquescent visuals—like fuzzy outtakes from *The Blair Witch Project*—conform. This occultish or preternatural inclination challenges the film's deconstructive premise, but does not disable it, as there is no reason to assume that Brisley's narrative is fictive, only outlandish.

Similarly, in *Deadness* (2013)—a group of slide carousels projecting a series of photographs of embalmed corpses, soundtracked by the words of John Troyer, an American sociologist—the gothic artifice of the photographic imagery colors the work's documentary, interview-based idiom. The scratches and smears in the vintage photo emulsion might be gusts of ectoplasm. Through the surrogate voice of Troyer, Baseman associates photography and embalming—both aiming to create the most "lifelike" image. The connection between death and photography is as familiar to photographic interpretation as deconstruction is to art filmmaking. Indeed, it was Roland Barthes who defined a sense of "that-has-been" as the photographic essence.

Deconstructive art can seem handicapped by its imposition of artistic self-reflexivity into objective representations, such as those on which documentary idioms are based. The narratives of *Deadness* and *The Last Walk* are contingent upon their credibility, but Baseman's critique of photographic artifice intercedes by impelling the works to question the efficacy of the mediums through which they are realized. Our investment in the narratives is intended to be qualified by an awareness of their artifice.

And yet, if the semiabstract images added to Brisley's voiceover can seem tendentious adjuncts to his disturbing account of real events, that account can also be seen as the artificial "horror" convention, which the images objectify through their analysis of the film medium. Similarly, viewed in a gallery context, the photographed coffins resemble formalistic sculptures, and the made-up corpses they contain, portrait effigies. The self-reflexive artifice of deconstruction is not merely tacked onto a documentary idiom, but proves to be interchangeable with it, as photography and art—initially presented as antitheses synonymous with objectivity and subjectivity—are equally metaphors for Baseman's theme: the process of bringing the dead back to life.

—Mark Prince