

Canadian artist sees through own lens

lewis's films trace pictorial traditions

BY DIANA SHERLOCK, CALGARY HERALD JULY 19, 2009

Venice captures our imaginations through pictures. The ancient city has become a location known to us because of how it has been represented in paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Tiepolo and Titian, in films such as David Lean's *Summertime* (1955) and Fellini's *Casanova* (1976) and in tourist ads and in tourists' snapshots.

A history of pictures can be traced through these still and moving images. *Spotlight cold morning* by mark lewis, on view at the canada Pavilion, 53rd Venice biennale, until nov. 22. lewis' films can be viewed online at marklewisstudio.com London-based Canadian artist Mark Lewis investigates these pictorial traditions in his contemplative film installation, *Cold Morning*, commissioned by Barbara Fischer, director/ curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, for the Canadian Pavilion at the 53rd International Art Exhibition--La Biennale di Venezia.

Lewis's largest commission to date, *Cold Morning* comprises four short, silent films presented as independent works within the custom-renovated Canada Pavilion. Formerly a photographer, Lewis has been making films since 1991 that explore the intersections between film, postwar modernist architecture and the history of modernism. Unlike in his earlier films, which examined the narrative conventions of feature films, *Cold Morning* investigates film's pictorial possibilities, and in particular, the mid-20th-century rear-projection technique.

The Hollywood-based Hansard family's pioneering work in rear projection is the subject of a fifth film, *Backstory*. Presented off-site at a theatre on Campo Santa Margherita, the 39-minute National Film Board of Canada documentary provides the backstory for the entire *Cold Morning* project.

In *Backstory*, the father and son duo anecdotally recounts a short history of rear-projection. The documentary reveals Lewis's interest in the constructed image, which is so apparent in the dislocating effects of rear projection.

Rear projection creates the cinematic illusion of unity by splicing two separate locations, which are filmed at different times, into one scene.

The technique reverses traditional cinematic techniques because the live action of the actors is, in fact, stationary, confined to a sound stage in front of the rear projection, while the stationary backdrop, or rear-projection plate, provides the context and movement in the scene. Rear projection is precise; the slightest mismatch in lighting or camera angle can reveal the technique and break the cinematic illusion.

Yet the potential of a disjointed, fragmented image that reveals to us an image within an image, or a film inside a film, is precisely what draws Lewis' attention. Lewis states he is interested in how "the history of picture making refers to the history of picture making." For him, rear projection demonstrates the moment at which film became modern, the moment when film filmed itself.

For *Cold Morning*, Lewis collaborated with Wasiuta Leung Design to transform the Canada Pavilion into a machine for a look that heightens the dislocating effects of rear projection and refers to filmmaking techniques and the camera itself.

The original pavilion, which was built in 1958 by Italian architect Enrico Peressutti, is a modest Crystal Palace nestled in a grove of trees between the monumental neo-colonial Great Britain and Germany Pavilions in the Giardini. Its design collides colonial perceptions of aboriginal shelters and wilderness (there is an infamous tree growing through the space), with International Style modernist architecture.

Wasiuta Leung's renovation significantly improves the pavilion for the display of contemporary art by maximizing exhibition space and limiting natural light.

The pavilion redesign reverses the flow of the building by sealing off the former entrance. One now enters at the narrow end of the space, which gradually opens into the curved gallery. The glass walls are glazed with a graduated automotive film to create a unified reflective black surface, which maintains the transparency of the original structure.

This glazing imperceptibly darkens the gallery as one moves further into it, but one never loses sight of the world outside. This makes the space more suitable for exhibiting Lewis's films, but also recalls the way light is controlled when it moves through a camera's aperture, or the way film develops over time. This reflective surface also creates a spatial illusion between inside and outside, image and reality.

From outside the pavilion, one sees the films' reflections through the glass wall. These reflections, which are interrupted by viewers in the space, overlay the actual films, which are projected on the walls inside.

The logic of film, and *Cold Morning*, unfolds in the tension between static and moving images, between unity and fragmentation, a dialectic key to Modernism. Lewis's film *TD Centre, 54th Floor* (2009) shows that as each single still image imperceptibly dissolves into the next, the film simultaneously destroys and composes itself. This film is shot from a dolly track on the 54th floor of Mies van der Rohe's 1967 Toronto Dominion Bank Tower.

The camera is directed sharply down toward the street to exaggerate its technical limitations and create two distinct optical effects. The extreme wide angle of the lens results in a super-wide shot at the top and a very narrow view at ground level. Consequently, the camera seems to be moving faster than it is, while the streetscape below seems static. The building's steel mullions frequently interrupt the camera's view, creating a shutter effect, or the illusion of a quick transition between stills.

Two of the four films at the Canadian Pavilion use the technique of rear projection. Alfred Hitchcock used rear projection in films such as *Saboteur* (1942) to heighten emotional tension and reveal the illusion of cinematic unity. Lewis' *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter's Night, Skating* (2009) and *The Fight* (2008) also use this strategy. *Nathan Phillips Square*, a key building in Canadian modernist architectural history, resonates with childhood memories for the artist and he uses it as a romantic backdrop for lovers. *The Fight* re-enacts a standoff between two families that Lewis witnessed at a market in the south of France, but shot against a backdrop filmed in Vienna. Both films are highly choreographed, but action is held at a standstill. What interested Lewis about *The Fight*, in particular,

was his fascination of being held in suspense, held at the moment before something magnificent or horrifying happens.

Similarly, in the film *Cold Morning*, Lewis uses high-definition digital technology to intensify the image and make us more aware of looking. As the namesake for the overall project, *Cold Morning* assumes a pivotal role within the exhibition. The film is a more real-than-real portrait of a homeless man on Bay Street at the centre of Toronto's financial district.

In writing about the work of Jeff Wall, Lewis was struck by the idea that "a snapshot is as good as a tableau," and in *Cold Morning*, the two meet. *Cold Morning* is equally a found image, the basis of documentary and a highly constructed scene. The fixed-frame composition severs the figure's head from his torso and captures him meticulously arranging his very few belongings around a sidewalk subway grate.

Metaphorically, the film's controlled view captures the confined social and psychological space of its subject. Subtle movements and banal objects become deliberate and iconic. For Lewis, this man describes "a humanity," and in *Cold Morning* he symbolizes modernism's failure to find universal solutions to society's fragmented reality. *Cold Morning*'s main figure falls outside of society's frame; his invisibility is necessary to maintain our illusion of a unified and egalitarian society. And showing what falls outside the frame is exactly what Mark Lewis' films are all about.

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