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Man with a Movie Camera

Canada's Mark Lewis launches an ambitious (and expensive) project for the Venice Biennale

BY DANIEL BAIRD

Imagine this: it is 2 a.m. on a January night in Nathan Phillips Square in Toronto, twenty below, with the numbing chill of the wind sweeping in off the lake. Above the rectangular ice rink, skaters gracefully circling, stand the curved towers of Finnish architect Viljo Revell's futuristic City Hall. The low, flying saucer-shaped council chamber hovers on the ground between them. At this hour, in this cold, the available light is crystalline and spooky, but there, at the edge of the skating rink, a bundled-up artist stands with his production crew, a 35mm movie camera trained over the ice toward City Hall, tracking the rink's perimeter. The artist is Mark Lewis, in Toronto from his home in London, England, to shoot a short film titled *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter's Night, Skating*, which will premiere along with several other films in a project titled *Cold Morning*, at the Canada Pavilion for the 2009 Venice Biennale in June. "I shoot from midnight until about four in the morning," he says. "It's going to be a classic romantic moment, an encounter. I like dance scenes in movies, and this will be a dance scene on ice. I chose skating because I have fond memories of skating as a kid. Of course, the couple will be shot in Los Angeles on a rotating stage."

Cut to another bone-chilling January night, this time at the elegant bar at the Drake Hotel. Set in a Queen Street West neighbourhood, once the home of Toronto's art scene and now being paved over by developers, the Drake was designed as a magnet for young, affluent professionals who want to bask in the idea of art. The crowd on this evening is anything but bohemian: men and women in dark, pinstriped business attire mill about sipping complimentary apple martinis and bottles of Grolsch beer. No one appears to be paying attention to projections of *122 Leadenhall Street* (2007) and *5262 Washington Boulevard* (2008), Lewis's studies of gritty urban street corners. This gathering is more about business than art, which becomes even clearer when Barbara Fischer — the executive director and chief curator of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Hart House, which is organizing this year's Canada Pavilion — stands up to speak. "We've already raised over \$850,000," she shouts in German-accented English over the bass lines booming through the floor from the stage downstairs, "and we still have to raise another \$250,000." She goes on to describe the various donor packages: \$20,000 gets you a copy of the limited edition of *122 Leadenhall Street*, tickets to the Biennale, a VIP dinner, and what has typically been a blowout party during the vernissage; \$10,000 gets the same package with the shorter *5262 Washington Boulevard* instead. And then, of course, there is the matter of tax receipts.

During all of this, Lewis sits at a window table nursing a beer, fidgety and somewhat morose, with the unglamorous winter night on Queen Street unfolding behind him like a scene from one of his films. Once Fischer has finished her plea, the music still pounding, the tall, fifty-one-year-old artist, his head shaved and his long, narrow face visibly exhausted from the previous night's shoot, drags himself up out of his chair and takes the microphone: "I'd like to thank the Drake for the loud music."

Organizing the Canada Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a demanding task, and Barbara Fischer has been doing it this year with a staff of one, from a small, cluttered office at Hart House. "For years, the National Gallery ran the Venice project and the pavilion," she tells me. "But in 1987, the project started to decentralize, and curators now apply in open competition to the Canada Council, to create more diversity and a stronger regional presence. Now the National Gallery has cut all ties to the project, and the Department of Foreign Affairs will cease funding it as of March, which means we have to do everything, from raising the money, to hiring Italian installers, to getting people to staff the pavilion." When I ask her why she proposed Mark Lewis, she says simply, "Mark is internationally well known for his ability to pull off a project, and his work is celebrated worldwide."

Born and raised in Hamilton, Ontario, Lewis studied in England at Harrow College and the Polytechnic of Central London before pursuing a career as a photographer in Toronto and Vancouver. His work during that period, which focused on desolate, forgotten urban spaces, was strongly influenced by Vancouver School photographers such as Roy Arden and Jeff Wall. His career only took off in the mid-'90s, when he began to experiment with film. Since then, he has had major solo exhibitions at galleries and museums in Canada and the US and across Europe, and he was the first recipient of the prestigious Gershon Iskowitz Prize at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

"I'm interested in experience and perception," Lewis tells me, "and film adds the element of time that's not possible in photography."

His early efforts in film closely reference — and deconstruct — the history of cinema. *A Sense of the End* (1996), for instance, opens with an abstract sequence of flashing shreds of colour, then tracks to a wounded man lying in a pool of blood. Cut through this shot is another showing the man running wildly until he collapses on a rooftop. "The End" appears on the screen, then repeats again and again as the film keeps resuming to show a woman in a cab, a funeral, a man fleeing through a crowded train station. *Upside Down Touch of Evil* (1997), meanwhile, reconstructs a sequence from Orson Welles's 1958 film noir, disorienting the viewer by flipping the film: upside down shadows slither along alley walls, headlights sail through the swarming dark at the top of the frame; the upended city at night looks both menacing and abstract. In *Peeping Tom* (2000), a rumination on Michael Powell's disturbing 1960 classic in which a young sociopath (whose name is Mark Lewis) jury-rigs his movie camera so he can stab women and film them as they die, the camera repeatedly zooms in on the face of a beautiful model. Her expression is absent and remote, and on the corner of her mouth and cutting into her lip is a ragged, disfiguring scar, as though she has been deliberately slashed. Silent and sinister, the image itself feels invasive, implicating the viewer in a violent voyeurism.

But Lewis's international reputation stems largely from the films he's made since 2000, which have moved away from explicit allusions to narrative cinema and toward an austere formalism that uses classical film language to explore our experience of the urban and natural worlds. These movies combine the compositional rigour of Vancouver School photography with the focused minimalism of Michael Snow's early films, lending weight and depth to the smallest incidents. Crucially, they explore our experience of time and light, the elements of continuous change, cinema's distilled essence.

In *Algonquin Park, September* (2001), mist slowly clears over a wooded island, and a canoe appears, barely visible as it cuts across the glassy water. A companion piece, *Algonquin Park, Early March* (2002), opens with what looks at first like a swath of pale, empty sky, before the camera pulls back and the tips of pines appear, gradually revealing that we are viewing a frozen lake. At the far right, tiny figures skate. And in *Golden Rod* (2006), a slow zoom on a boarded-up cabin in a meadow of goldenrod suggests the degree to which the camera frames what we see and how we see it in time: the flowers rustling in the breeze, the dark green trees, the patch of sky. These works all evoke the visionary naturalism of Canadian landscape painters like Tom Thomson and David Milne, supplementing it with the sensation of movement, transition, passage, of the camera pulling back, the mist lifting.

Much of Lewis's work over the past few years has focused on architecture and the built environment. He is typically drawn to places where people congregate and circulate. In *Children's Games, Heygate Estate* (2002), for instance, the camera steadily tracks along an oppressive raised concrete passage between working-class apartment buildings, while children play in the yards and alleys below. *Airport* (2003) features a single shot out through curved windows at Pearson International Airport in Toronto. It is winter, the light pale, streaks of snow in the grass between runways. No travellers are visible, only taxiing planes and service vehicles and a sea of cement. And in the eerily beautiful *Prater Hauptallee, Dawn and Dusk* (2008), the screen is divided down the middle between dawn and dusk, with joggers and cyclists moving down the same tree-lined Vienna street. They seem afloat in an unstable penumbra of time, the place where dawn cascades into day, dusk collapses into night.

Lewis's Venice project makes use of rear projection, a classic Hollywood technique in which an actor, say, is filmed in the studio against the backdrop of a film set elsewhere, creating odd effects familiar to viewers of films from the '40s and '50s — James Mason in Nicholas Ray's 1956 *Bigger Than Life*, for example, frantically steering what looks like a completely stationary car as the road unspools wildly behind him. Lewis recently completed a documentary, *Back Story*, on the history of the technique, and employed it in his well-known 2006 piece, *Rear Projection: Molly Parker*.

In that film, Parker appears to be standing on a path near a roadside gas station and a cabin. She is wearing a summer dress, her arms folded, the dense stand of trees behind her flecked with early-autumn red and orange. The camera slowly moves toward her, and then, suddenly, the trees go dark, and as the camera backs away the trees lose their leaves, the light blanches, and the landscape fills with snow. Parker remains there, bare armed and bare legged in the dead of a Canadian winter. Lewis's films are always in part about the evolving history of the medium, but they also point to something about our relationship to the world: Parker seems lonely, helpless, oblivious, and disconnected, time and the seasons in fast-forward behind her.

"I'm interested in the idea that different parts of an image can be from different times and places," he says. "And I like combining different technologies. For *Nathan Phillips Square, A Winter's Night, Skating* the part shot in Toronto is in film, and the part shot in Los Angeles is in digital."

Cold Morning combines Lewis's interest in the history and nature of cinema with the history of modernism in architecture. In addition to the romantic — and, for Lewis, lighthearted — *Nathan Phillips Square*, at least two other films will be included in the installation. *TD Centre, 54th Floor* consists of a steep, crushed view of King Street in Toronto's financial district from the fifty-fourth floor of one of German architect Mies van der Rohe's last major works, the sleekly transcendent Toronto-Dominion Centre. And in the title film, *Cold Morning*, a homeless man arranges his personal effects over a steaming sewer grate, old dirty snow in the gutter, cars rushing past, pigeons warming themselves on a nearby grate. Lewis's project moves from cinematic lyricism (the camera in *Nathan Phillips Square* moves as though it, too, were gliding on skates) to the

troubled, utopian dreams of modernist architecture (the unravelling financial system as seen from Mies's pure, Platonic heights) to the outcasts of a twenty-first-century city.

Fittingly, the films will play at the Canada Pavilion in Venice, a building that itself borrows from different architectural genres. "The pavilion was made in 1958 by progressive Italian architects," says Barbara Fischer. "It looks sort of like a garden shed, and it plays off the neoclassicism of the other buildings nearby, like the German Pavilion. With Mark, it will be part of the project. He lays the history of film into the medium of architecture. The whole pavilion will be a cinematic machine, moving from daylight to cinema light." Lewis and Fischer have planned *Cold Morning* so carefully that Fischer commissioned a New York design firm to do detailed architectural drawings of the installation. The films will be presented as single-screen projections, with the visitor literally moving from the ordinary world into the meticulously orchestrated and shimmering world of the moving image.

For Lewis, the relationship between film and reality, daylight and cinema light, is complicated and symbiotic: his films unmask the shape of how we see and move through and inhabit our artificial and conflicted world; and when we walk back out of the gallery, eyes squinting, we see things differently.

Back at the Drake, with its plush red sofas, its gleaming, brass-railed bar and low, atmospheric light, one is reminded again that a project like *Cold Morning* costs a lot of money, which is why Barbara Fischer continues to schmooze frantically. As the event winds down, we spill out onto the icy sidewalk and into a car and head for Hart House, where Lewis is staying. The Nathan Phillips Square portion of the shoot is finished, but there is still lots of work to do — most of the work, in fact. He will be in London in a few days, then back in Toronto in March, then off to Los Angeles, where he has a crew that does his rear screen work.

By turns weary and anxious, he sinks back in his seat, takes a deep breath, and says, "God, I hate fundraising." There is something almost comic about a very intellectual, German-born curator and a very focused London-based artist immersed in the rigours of bootstrapping an expensive project on behalf of Canada. But still, the lovely palaces and gardens of Venice at the end of spring, and all those VIP dinners and parties, are just a few months away.

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