

BURN

Curated by Sarah Pierce, Art House, Dublin

By Annie Fletcher

Can there be trauma without consequence? Or is it just that here the consequence is rendered somehow intangible? Patrick Jolley and Reynold Reynolds set their work in environments where nobody could survive. These startling contexts appear to have little connection with mortality. They have created a silent underwater drama in *The Drowning Room*. In *Seven Days 'til Sunday* they film a body in freefall from the skies, a body which literally bounces and slaps against the built world as it falls down in slow motion. With the perfect cinematic conceit however, the shattered body never hits the ground. There's something remarkably contemplative and even beautiful about these impossible and violent cinematic renderings. Is this what trauma is then – utterly detached, disconnected, unfathomable? Doesn't trauma catapult one out of the world of normative human relations and social space – where does one go – what alienated space does one enter? This sense of dissonance and alienation infuses the work of Jolley and Reynolds.

These radical circumstances seem to act as a kind of dislocated space through which to explore the shaping of representation. One expects the cinematic screen to create a distance from lived experience and real time. In a similar manner to the photograph, film allows one to enter the symbolic where meaning is made and interpretation is inscribed on what is seen. But Jolley and Reynolds in their short films and installation projects seem to push their audience one step further.

In their latest collaboration *Burn*, Jolley and Reynolds have chosen a burning room as their film set. Flames lick the curtains, climb the walls and devour the room yet the event seems devoid of consequence, untouched and untouchable. The protagonists treat the fire as a mild backdrop, which does not stop their silent activity. They try instead to be at home, simply present in the domestic interior, used to each other in a world weary kind of way. In the burning interior; some survive and others are consumed and the camera captures it all. Each flame, each physical movement is romanced on celluloid. The filmmakers are relentlessly democratic (or resolutely detached) refusing to focus on human frailty or motive alone. The characters appear important as physical matter in space, just as capable of disintegrating as the carpet or the curtains. Of what

purpose are strict definitions between people and objects and the territory they occupy? What symbolic properties do these non-communicative bodies own in a social space that is disintegrating and transforming before our eyes. Perhaps there is no language for such experience. Jolley and Reynolds engagement with the history and possibilities of cinema is both knowing and playful. There is a kind of space between cinematic know-how and low tech special effects with which they seem to endlessly toy (no soft diffused light could ever imitate the water filled scene in *The Drowning Room* with fish bits floating around). One is never allowed to lose oneself in the story. In *Burn* the viewer is denied gratuitously violent cinematic expectations. There may be fire but it's a quiet disaster, there is no blood, no screaming - no notional trauma. Their work is instead supremely visual. Everything captivates the eye: the dripping melting fridge, the burnt body slumped on the table, and the filmic sweep from above as the snow miraculously quells the flames at the end. Even the fire-starter (the evildoer perhaps?) is represented through the mirror found in his sleeping lover's bedroom - classic cinema. It's a screen within the screen. Each careful mediation and each pleasurable visual device distances one further - emphasizing the disjunctive nature of Jolley's and Reynold's project.

The iconography offered is at once utterly strange and utterly familiar. The artists conduct things in slow motion, in fabulously clichéd dream sequence mode. Strange hooded characters are introduced evoking thoughts of mysticism - breaking a sense of narrative and projecting one further into a dreamlike stasis. The artists give us no verbal narrative hooks to pull the viewer through. A familiar feeling pervades - there is an unknown set of rules and language just waiting to be decoded but ultimately the viewer is outside of the loop - unable to confirm or deny the instinctive associations they make. One is left to make each scene intelligible. This is true spectacle. In *Mythologies* Barthes argues more than once when discussing the notion of spectacle that the audience must be complicit. He believed that there is a kind of direct synthesis between this jaded knowing and enjoyment experienced. This is precisely where one is positioned with *Burn*: implicated as emotionally abstracted but visually seduced participants. All the while trying to make sense of a narrative that refuses to unfold and to empathise with characters who are autistic to us. To paraphrase Barthes contemplating the enjoyment of a 'fixed' wrestling match as distinct to the unfolding suspense of boxing - we too become overwhelmed by the obviousness of our role.

Annie Fletcher, December 2001