

USA

MICHAEL ROBINSON

Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago

Within the span of the past decade, Michael Robinson's films have orbited a refined set of aesthetic themes and deceptively simple technical tricks. Some have incorporated his own lush 16mm shots of dense vegetation and sparse interiors alongside a select range of appropriated imagery and sound, while others have consisted solely of lifted sources put through a variety of disorientating visual effects, as though adopting heavily strobed Structural film strategies for the new millennium. These split approaches have given Robinson's films the feel of prose poems, equally lyrical and coded, or of psychedelic fever dreams, unsettling and optically delirious. His work combines a heavy dosage of pop-cultural detritus in image (saccharine TV episodes, early video-game graphics, slick music videos) and sound (a karaoke Thompson Twins rendition, shiny 1970s rock ballads, distorted washes of radio static) with a plain adoration of the shapes, colours and textures of the natural world.

In *Circle in the Sand* (2012), Robinson's newest film and the centrepiece of his recent show 'Circle Spectre Paper Flame' at Carrie Secrist Gallery, the filmmaker extends his focus on both the glossy veneer of contemporary mass culture and the enduring pictorial allure of the wilderness. The film is especially notable for two reasons. At 45 minutes, *Circle in the Sand* is more than three times the length of any of his previous films – a duration, as Robinson has noted, akin to an episode of a standard television drama. The film also approaches something closer to narrative film-making than usual, at least by the standards of avant-garde cinema, insofar as there is a plot and a cast of actors occasionally delivering scripted lines. Set in a post-apocalyptic

near-future, the film follows a band of drifters as they wander through war-torn coastal and forested landscapes while sifting through unearthed material wreckage. The characters interact with compact discs, small household appliances and piles of pastel-hued acrylic fingernails with a child-like fascination, as foreign items that can be put to novel uses. The only dialogue in the film comes from texts that are read aloud by either the vagabond-soldier male guards or the colourfully ragged female walkers: Yelp reviews, romance novels and celebrity magazines, as spoken from the future, become archival documents of current junk culture. With the theatrically clad figures moving through languorous shots of beautiful terrain in search of flotsam, the tone is somewhat akin to the campiness of Kenneth Anger's *Puce Moment* (1949) within the flora-drenched films of Nathaniel Dorsky.

The narrative format doesn't fully suit Robinson's significant skills as an artist. While it is great to see him push into new territory and expand his scope, the most enjoyable elements of *Circle in the Sand* are those that hark back to his earlier films: an enigmatic use of poetic subtitles floating beneath lurking shots, with overlaid and out-of-synch slow pans imbuing a ghostly aura, as in *The General Returns From One Place to Another* (2006); beaches acting as liminal spaces where simple actions and events take on nearly occult meanings, as in *Light Is Waiting* (2007) and *If There Be Thorns* (2009); and luminous shots of light seeping through pin-pricked magazine pages, recalling the saturated images of wet glass refracting daylight in *Chiquita and the Soft Escape* (2003).

One of the unique draws of the show, aside from the new film, was the opportunity to see a group of Robinson's recent photographic and collage works. The four large and crisply printed photographs – three of which use anonymous books as mirror-like objects to contort beams of light over woodland backgrounds, the other a zoomed-in night-scape of rhizomatic, pearl-white mushroom shoots – seem to act as auxiliary frames edited from the final cut of *Circle in the Sand*. The collages look more tangential, which only adds to their appeal. Each of the 12 works, mostly small in size, plays with a mixture of naturalist illustrations and futuristic laser shapes. Similar to the editing effects that Robinson employs in many of his films, these collages use deceptively simple techniques to produce clever optical tricks. Pasted onto found magazine pages, dense columns of acorns, pine branches and rocks overlap with abstracted geometries of pyramids, graphs and spirals to create the same kind of interplay between psychedelic futurism and open natural environments that continually reappears in the artist's film work.

Robinson is apparently working on a feature-length film, which will be connected thematically to *Circle in the Sand*. Those who follow his work will be anticipating the degree to which he can balance his mastery of experimental modes with the pacing and movement of a longer work. If he continues to follow these divergent threads, it will be fascinating to see what emerges next.

MATTHEW ERICKSON

1
Tony Oursler
from the series 'UFO',
photographic print,
9 x 12 cm

2
Michael Robinson
Circle in the Sand, 2012,
film still

3
Michael Robinson
untitled (wave), 2013,
archival pigment print,
83 x 122 cm

4
Lynne Cohen
Spa, 2000,
c-type print, 1.4 x 1.7 m



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