



BUILDING DAYS

BY MATTHEW BENINGTON

OPEN: 31ST MARCH – 21ST APRIL, 11AM – 4PM FRI – SAT OR BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

The Ungrateful Great Grandson

Matthew Benington and I 'met' six years ago over email because of a misunderstanding. Surprisingly – or perhaps I need to stop being surprised now data reemerges in the most surprising of places – nothing should be surprising anymore – I still have the correspondence:

5 March 2012 at 16:14

Hi Jonathan, i got word from Philip Trevelyan that you would be screening the Moon and the Sledgehammer at the RCA around June time. It seems it will be getting plenty of screen time with my intended showing in March, all great!

I just wondered whether you could forward me Katy Macmillan's email/number, as i am trying to negotiate around the screening fee having already approached the department to no avail.

Best wishes

Matt Benington

Actually, I'd screened the film a year before in a seminar room to a paltry audience of one (plus me). *The Moon and the Sledgehammer*, released in 1971, is, to appropriate the film critic David Robinson's words, entirely unlike any other film. Or perhaps it was when Robinson first saw it. A bridge to the pre-war films of John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings, since, its languid camera movement and plotless structure, a blend of self-reflexive ethnographic cinema and poetic non-narrative documentary, has become standard fare in the celebrated artist films of Ben Rivers.

The ostensible subject of *The Moon and the Sledgehammer* is Mr Page and his eccentric family ('A film about a real family', reads the press) living an unbelievable primitive existence, tinkering with steam engines, moribund relics of the industrial revolution, in isolation from the modern world. It looks as though it might be set in the Appalachian Mountains, but it's Newhaven, just outside Brighton.

Ostensible because nothing is what it seems: Mr Page, dressed in oily work wear, is no folksy naïf – he'd been a professional clown. His performance to camera in the circus of the woods seeds a growing, queasy collapse of reality that the film is predicated on (interestingly, Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* was in cinemas the year before, in 1970). Ostensible because something weirder, accented by madness, incest and patricide, emerges: Mr Page is a charismatic, controlling and ultimately infantilising patriarch. It's not English primitivism, but how your parents, they fuck you up.

Trevelyan's approach, according to the critic John Russell Taylor, was 'poetic, instinctive', as though he himself were not also, like Mr Page, a ringmaster of appearances. Every non-syncrusic sound, every quirk of movement, every shot that lingers for just that little bit too long is charismatic. Before the lens of Trevelyan's Eclair camera Mr Page is no more nor less than the actors of insect life and furniture, chickens and trees. Eisensteinian montage constructs allusive meaning. I don't know that Philip Trevelyan's father, Julian Trevelyan, a major interwar British artist, fucked him up. Perhaps Julian hadn't fucked up Philip at all. I daren't ask him at the screening Matthew hosted.

That screening was the last time I saw *The Moon and the Sledgehammer*. With this invitation to write on Matthew's work, eight years later, I've been reflecting on my own identification with the film. Then, simplistically, I was interested in films of people in places: Margaret Tait's film of Hugh MacDiarmid, for example; Holly Antrum's on Jennifer Pike; Frank Wierke's on Michael Hamburger. Remembering the film, screening it in the theatre of memory, so to speak, it's very different – a sad, tortured, psycho-sexual filial drama. Sadness is not necessarily incompatible with romanticism, but now, as I remember, it's what stymies any trace of sentimentalism in the film. Matthew? I've not asked him about it. But he does, in a sense, have his own species of Mr Page.

Born in 1903, Arnold Benington, Matthew's great grandfather, was a popular ornithologist, teacher, adventurer, broadcaster and writer who, throughout his life, kept extensive diaries, field notes, sketches and paintings of trips and species, from Northern Ireland, where he lived and worked, to Iceland. His was a mediated life in public, one that has not only left a trace through his tremendous output, but also in the self-conscious staging of the self in hundreds of black and white and hand-tinted photographs.

When the camera's not trained on birds, Benington turns it back on the ornithologist: Benington saves gyrfalcon nestlings; Benington ascends tree to sparrowhawk nest; Benington emerges from hide, a toothy smile for the camera; Benington rings Manx shearwaters. In each he is perfectly poised, immaculately turned out: strong, handsome and heroic. Benington in a cave on Rathlin facing out to sea is, of course, immaculate Friedrich – the wandering ornithologist in a sea of fog (Friedrich fuelled the imaginary of a divided nineteenth-century Germany, much as Benington, the 'Ulster Naturalist', was engaged in a project of coupling nature with nation). In the work *Unstable Monument* Matthew, the ungrateful grandson, disrupts the view, collaging over it, rather antithetically, a full-frame photograph of a blue tarp over a gravestone. Is this the great grandfather's unceremonious memorial? Is it fucked up that the ungrateful great grandson treats the family archive as material for disruption? How does this writing enable Matthew's project?

In this exhibition, 'Building Days', and more generally, Matthew's work is an interface between forms of memory, public, personal and familial and his own complex (dis)identifications with them. *Bug head drawing* memorialises an earlier time in childhood when he aspired to draw from nature. Evoking the beautiful cobalt blue of Anna Atkins' cyanotypes of flora and fauna, his series of seven cyanotypes, *Newbridge is a residential electoral Ward on the Western edge of Bath.*, displaces visual representation for language. Legible, concrete like Haiku, they capture and preserve a moment in Matthew's life so precisely that ultimately what remains is a peculiarly obdurate mystery. *Incidental marks 20/01/2014 – 29/03/2018*, writerly registrations in bitumen and beeswax on copperplate, speak to a longer artistic aspiration for non-intentional marks and therefore a state of relative unselfconscious.

Today, often, contemporary artists critically examining masculinity do some from outside a cisgendered position of male, whether from a female, queer or trans perspective. Matthew is unusual in that he speaks from a position of alienation inside, not only inside masculinity, but family too, so that the latter, a protectorate of the former, can be made self-conscious before the camera.

Jonathan P. Watts