

On **Mission** by Christopher Brayshaw

Owen Kydd's video installation **Mission** consists of three different silent sequences of portrait and landscape images made with a stationary camera and presented side-by-side in the gallery. The sequences differ slightly in length, and their shots are thrown into novel relief by the work's ceaseless visual permutation. For me, this structure represents Kydd's ambitious attempt to marry the ancient art of the still picture, whose static images imply an endless plenitude of detail, with the more recent art of cinematography, whose temporality makes it appear more "life like." Paintings, drawings and photographs seem to belong to an older world; they demand a different attention span than cinema, a probing, self-directed, and more contemplative kind of looking.

Kydd has structured **Mission** so that the work responds equally well to "pictorial" and "cinematographic" modes of looking. The installation doesn't really click until the evidence gleaned from each mode has been carefully compared with its other, just as two slightly different aerial photographs will generate the illusion of three-dimensional relief when perceived as a gestalt. Each element works with its other to generate a mysterious third, a composite continuous with both which provides more information than either on its own.

Mission's subject is a small town hard against the northern edge of the Fraser Valley, approximately forty miles east of Vancouver. The town's notable features include the highway bridge to Abbotsford and the other communities south of the river; a timeworn downtown strip (pawnshops; liquor marts; Tim Horton's; architecture and signage implying a certain kinship with the "American vernacular"

of photographers like Henry Wessel and Stephen Shore); and Westminster Abbey, a picturesque Benedictine monastery perched high on a hill above the town.

Faced with the difficulty of representing such a heterogeneous place – even views less than a mile apart bear little resemblance to one another – Kydd begins with images which, like still pictures, are complete in themselves. By the time a view of a roadside slough or a suburban cul-de-sac briefly dissolves into darkness, and is replaced by the parking lot at a local car racing meet, or a tangled swath of urban forest, or the nodding fat pink and yellow heads of dahlia blooms in the monastery garden, we somehow feel that we have absorbed the essence of the scene, that Kydd's camera has shown us more than we might have seen on our own. But because we are never shown just one view, but always several simultaneously, this "essence" is always juxtaposed against other equally self-sufficient scenes, thereby undermining the powerful sense of completeness we attribute to each shot on its own.

Mission alternately employs the powerful air of self-sufficiency that inheres in still pictures, and the fundamental properties of cinematography (movement; duration; time) to indicate that each of the installation's single shots can only be considered autonomous if it is studied in isolation. The shots' pretense of being still pictures is also complicated by details that undermine their "stillness." Wind moves forest branches and the dahlias' heads. Arcs of water and clouds of drifting smoke obscure the local drag strip. Cars cross and recross the Fraser bridge, sun semaphoring off their windshields and chrome. And Kydd's portrait subjects -- individuals he met while filming -- can hardly

keep still. They blink and shiver and nod; they smile, or rock to and fro, amused by Kydd's simple command to do nothing, or at least as little as possible, for a minute or two. They are conscious of the camera and maybe a little embarrassed by it, but they control the terms of their depiction, choosing to accentuate certain characteristics or quirks of personality, and to de-emphasize others. A window washer and a Benedictine monk keep their faces straight, preferring to represent themselves through the accoutrements of their respective trades: the cassock, the squeegee and brush. A young Sto:lo man makes a gesture of openness, consenting to the artist filming him. Three girlfriends stay in almost constant motion as they subliminally study the camera and each other. And so on.

Here, I think, Kydd's project transcends its moment, and achieves a kind of communion with older forms of picture making, exemplified by the work of artists such as Brueghel, Hokusai, Cezanne, and, locally, the late E.J. Hughes. These artists all use landscape as a jumping-off point for the representation of culture, while withholding any explicit moral or ideological judgment of their subjects. If disturbances do occur – Brueghel's Icarus plunging into the sea; Hughes' sawmills' smoky clouds – they are recorded without comment, as if to comment would somehow break faith with the artist's obligation to simply depict what is there. Kydd's refusal to step in front of his subjects by categorizing and judging is fuelled by a similarly democratic curiosity, and by something like an ethics, a position well articulated by the French philosopher Hippolyte Taine: "I want to reproduce the objects as they are or as they would be even if I did not exist."

January 2007
Vancouver