



COBRA MIST

EMILY RICHARDSON AND THE LEGACY OF ORFORD NESS

Following the success of her short film *Petrolia* set in the oilfields of the Cromarty Firth, filmmaker Emily Richardson directs her camera south to the loneliest stretch of the East Suffolk coast at Orford Ness, a remote shingle spit that was once a top secret military testing site, now long abandoned to the elements. Recognising the visual and imaginative power of Richardson's previous work, Animate Projects commissioned her to make a film for Channel Four evoking the landscape on the Ness, now owned and managed by the National Trust. Incredibly, in only a brief six minutes of footage, Richardson manages to comprehensively convey the obscure significance and melancholy intensity harboured by this uniquely haunting landscape.

She achieves this through a subtle marrying of technical prowess, creative innovation and basic photographic awareness, that is to say, she possesses an 'eye' and is therefore able to identify and secure the full collaboration of an image by framing.

Cobra Mist refers to a project to develop 'over the horizon' radar that took place on the site during the cold war. This vacant strip of shingle between Orford village and the North Sea had long been viewed an ideal location to test conventional bomb trajectories and other weaponry but, in the post-war nuclear age, it was here that quietly determined men in duffel coats secretly laboured over Britain's independent nuclear bomb, testing trigger and priming mechanisms in a series of reinforced bunkers and hangars that now, in advanced states of dereliction, litter the deserted site.

The most intriguing and mysterious of these structures are the Japanese style 'pagodas' clearly discerned from the mainland, low flat roofs heaped with shingle supported by a series of struts, designed to collapse and smother any unforeseen explosion. The photogenic nature of these and the scattering of other mournful edifices are self-evident and Richardson makes the most of her opportunity. Although *Petrolia* employed the same

highly effective time lapse sequences that skewed industrial reality towards a hallucinatory climatic instability and existential tension, *Cobra Mist* is an altogether different animal. Whereas *Petrolia* dealt with the frenzied unremitting activity of rigs and refinery, with 'action' so to speak, *Cobra Mist* by contrast records a landscape of almost complete inanimation, of death. The only colour relief is in the red stripes of the trespassing lighthouse glimpsed in the distance, and the only sound of life the uncomfortably insistent chafing cries of gulls.

The film opens with an auditory jump. A vast mysterious circle of stone is observed traced in the shingle, appearing like the vestige of some arcane pre-Christian site of deification, but these outlines are all that endures of a short-lived twentieth century building whose function remains unknown. Beyond, a flat unrelenting expanse stretches remorselessly to the horizon, immediately arousing a sense of dislocation and loneliness.

Time lapse causes weather patterns to mutate into one another, ominous cloud banks loom up like a breaking wave and are suddenly gone, a pale diffused sunlight opens briefly like a shy bloom before being elbowed out by the next cumulonimbus or crackling shower. A clutch of radio masts quiver like terrible primed needles in the distance. In an exquisitely framed shot, concrete cubes are shown half sunk in the shingle, like giant dice cast there by a casual hand, while twisted metal fragments and the defoliated carcasses of equipment seem as if rooted to the place and moment of rejection. Man has left behind the driftwood of his science and moved on. There is a palpable sense of an overreaching experiment abruptly abandoned, the imposed designation of an eternal tomb, a memorial to the dark arts of rationality visited only by the elements.

Richardson was permitted entry to areas of the Ness normally off limits to the general public for safety reasons. Here in this lost domain amongst

the eerie pagodas whose brooding silhouettes stand out boldly against the vast, ever-changing Suffolk skies, Richardson's camera makes one of several 360° pans in the film, recording the humped backs of the forsaken bunkers and the detritus between them, as if all is adrift on the languid swell of the uniformly grey-brown shingle. Then we are inside a decaying building, roof long collapsed, with time lapse-fuelled sunlight briskly sending ironwork shadows across the algae-greened rotting walls. Uncanny sounds are heard, echoes, as if something may be about to emerge, but nothing is seen, no-one appears. Towards the end a sudden shower of rain earnestly beads the lens as if in a final plea for communication, before darkness ultimately descends like a mourning veil over the vague contours of a hangar.

With *Cobra Mist* Emily Richardson proves once more she is a filmmaker of vision and artistic integrity who always manages to extract every creative possibility from the seam she is working.

This short work stands not only as a lasting achievement in the art of film, but a solitary document of one of the most enigmatic and covert areas of our coastline.

Six Films by Emily Richardson is available on DVD. The DVD includes *Redshift* (2001), *Nocturne* (2002), *Aspect* (2004), *Petrolia* (2005), *Block* (2005), *Cobra Mist* (2008) and a new essay by William Fowler. See www.emilyrichardson.org.uk

Upcoming shows: *Figuring Landscapes* brings together artists' moving image work from the UK and Australia. Screening programmes will be complemented by an international symposium at Tate Modern in February 2009. *Cobra Mist* shows November 14th at the Aurora Festival Norwich; November 22nd at Encounters Festival, Bristol; November 26th at FACT, Liverpool; and December 5th at the Tate Modern, London.

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By Will