

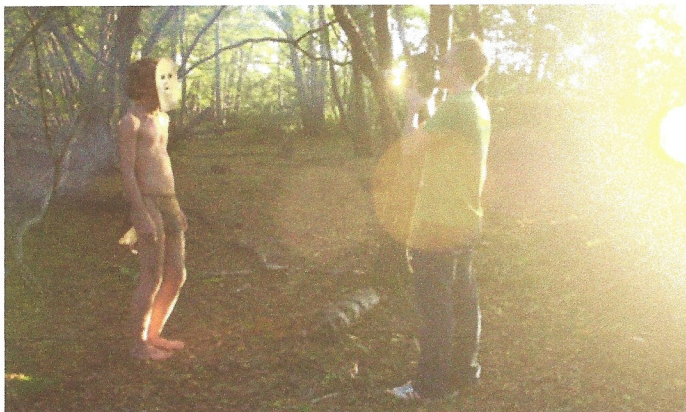
Artist of the week 125: Ben Rivers

This British artist captures abandoned houses, looming mountains and white-haired hermits on a wind-up camera



Skye Sherwin
guardian.co.uk, Thursday 10 February 2011 15.01 GMT

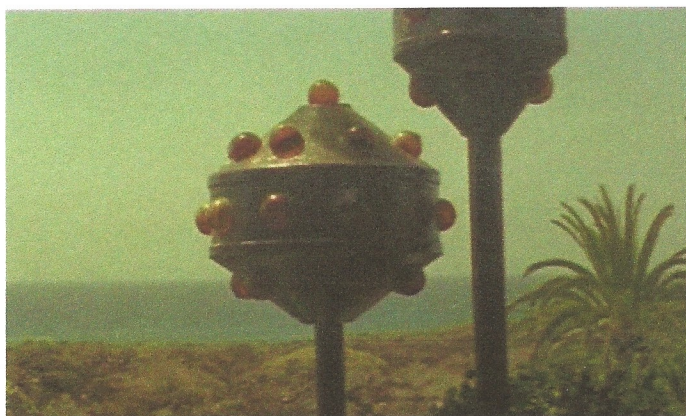
A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



'Castaway from social norms' ... Production still from *Slow Action* (2010). Photograph: Alice Dubieniec/Ben Rivers

Anyone who has ever dreamed about running away to the wilderness will feel a pang watching Ben Rivers's quietly elegiac films. In the past six years the young British artist has trained his camera on abandoned houses, bracken-decked woods, looming mountains and white-haired hermits.

These present-day Robinson Crusoes are islands unto themselves, cast away from social norms. This existence is one they've chosen. The cut and thrust of the modern world is not for them. Instead, their makeshift dwellings house a lifetime's worth of foraged finds – tools, old wire, tin teapots – that spread across every surface. As their gentle monologues and Rivers's lingering camerawork suggests, they'd rather eat food grown from seeds scattered by birds, or muse on the mysteries of evolution while beetles make their slow way across millennia-old rocks.



'A full-blown futuristic sci-fi epic' ... Still from *Slow Action* (2010). Photograph: Ben Rivers

The work of Rivers, who was born and raised in Somerset, has garnered increasing recognition in the past few years. A nomination for the [2010 Jarman award](#) followed a best short film Tiger award at [Rotterdam's renowned art house film festival](#) in 2008. The way he captures his subjects, cut loose from conventional time, could not be more appropriate: flickering old 16mm stock shot on a wind-up [Bolex camera](#), which he then hand-processes himself. The hermits are found through word of mouth, with the artist

taking time to get to know them properly before embarking on these collaborative works.

Rivers's first project in this vein was *This Is My Land*. The 2006 portrait of a self-sufficient gardener named Jake, who was captured in shifting, rain-cloud black and white film, seems perfectly attuned to the Scottish wilds it captures. As Jake goes about his daily business of nursing birds or sawing logs, the urban world seems very far away. However, Rivers's work is not straightforwardly idealistic. *I Know Where I'm Going*, from 2008, for instance, envisages a bleak future. Musing on what will survive when people disappear, the artist journeys into a depopulated landscape of empty motorways and abandoned cars, with everything caked in deep snow.

Why we like him: Rivers's latest film, *Slow Action*, is a full-blown futuristic sci-fi epic shot on four "islands" across the globe: holiday favourite Lanzarote; [Gunkanjima](#) in Japan; [Tuvalu](#) in the Pacific; and a somehow post-apocalyptic Somerset. A canny mix of documentary and staged footage is married to a narration of fantastical encyclopaedia entries on Utopia, illuminating the islanders' romantic, weird or destructive social codes.

Winding path: Rivers's desire to find real-life hermits was sparked six years ago by what he calls an "obsessive phase" of reading Norwegian novelist [Knut Hamsun's](#) *Mysteries and Pan*, coupled with an ongoing dream about going to live in a shack in a forest.

Where can I see him? *Slow Action* is at [Matt's Gallery](#), London until 20 March.