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Ben Rivers: Slow Action

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By **Martin Herbert**

It's over. In the four 16mm films that comprise Ben Rivers's *Slow Action* (2010), some kind of apocalypse has transpired, sea levels have risen dramatically and human society is scattered on disparate isles and atolls, where it evolves discretely at weird tangents. In pseudo-ethnographic fashion, Rivers's camera roams four of these in turn; though in actuality, following the example of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and, particularly, Werner Herzog's *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), he's filming real places as they are today and layering a fictional voiceover on top. The first segment is shot on the blasted volcanic landscape of Lanzarote. Here, we're told, it's incredibly hot: after sunset, the place comes alive with people who live according to reason and logic. (Reflecting this, animated geometries appear in the sky.) They court each other, we're told, by means of equations. It's the land of the left-brained.

The next island – actually one of the Polynesian isles of Tuvalu – is tropical, scattered with wreckage and prowled by wild boar. The typical mode of death among its inhabitants is suicide, and generally it looks like the kind of rancid utopia Tacita Dean might be found photographing. Indeed, utopic thought – either dashed on the rocks or unpredictably mutated – is the organising principle of the whole series. The third island, Gunkanjima, a burned-out mining colony off the coast of Nagasaki, is covered with deserted and hideous industrial buildings. We're told that this was, indeed, one castaway's "anti-human utopia"; this was his idea of perfection. Utopia, Rivers's voiceover muses philosophically, is by definition no-place: it can only be approached, never reached.

In 'Somerset', the final zone (the actual location unidentified; Rivers, making a joke with himself, is from Somerset, England), jungle-dwelling figures stand for the camera, wearing nightmarish rudimentary masks. These people, we're told, are zealously political and in a constant state of revolution. By this point, the islands are divergent enough that one starts to think of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), with its proliferating dream metropolises. And indeed, for all the bravura and intelligence of Rivers's film, that's what hobbles it somewhat: it often remains in the collected shadows of precursors. This is most apparent in the Gunkanjima section, whose footage is hugely similar to that in Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Thomas Nordanstad's film *Hashima* (2002). Not surprisingly, because it was shot on the same inhuman island. A section of the Lanzarote sequence, meanwhile, was set in a cave that's already got a sound installation in it. Having been there, I can confirm that the visitors' café is just out of shot.

In practical terms, then, *Slow Action* reminds us that there's an economy of ruins – with artists scuttling around the globe trying to claim them – and, more generally, an economy of tropes. Here, Rivers can sometimes seem to be shuffling a well-worn set of flashcards: utopia, ruin, fictional documentary, Herzog, metafiction, etc. He's good at it, and resultantly this is the sort of suavely synthetic art that'll clarify a historical moment and the issues at play within it. He's also capable, at points, of a surpassing and eloquent strangeness. The 'Somerset' figures, with their huge primitive masks, really do make one think of a species that's regressed into something barely recognisable. In those moments no other artwork, film or book enters the mind, and Rivers is wholly – and impressively – his own man.?

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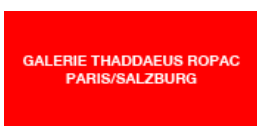
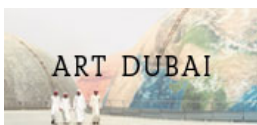
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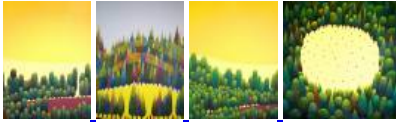
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