

Ben Rivers

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Ben Rivers, Slow Action film still, 2010 - Courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery

Time Out says

By Helen Sumpter

Posted: Mon Feb 28 2011

On the Island of Eleven, the inhabitants believe that they are holograms and conduct their courtship rituals through an exchange of mathematical equations. On Hiva (The Society Islands), life is novelistic and residents spend their days narrating tales of themselves. The island of Kanzennashima is a rock on which stands the ruins of a former coal mine. While on the revolutionary isle of Somerset, at the age of 42 all men and women are expected to run into battle to sacrifice themselves for a dream. All this we are told by the two narrators of Ben Rivers's atmospheric 45-minute film 'Slow Action'.

Rivers's four-part film work reveals the geography and ethnography of the above four island utopias, established after sea levels have risen, as the result of an unknown, near future, apocalyptic event. The film partly reminds of 1930s or '40s documentaries - grainy and degraded 16mm film stock, the considered, authoritative speaking style of the narrators, subtle snatches of music and sound effects reminiscent of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The overall mood evoked, however, is a far more complex, contemplative and at times melancholy and moving one, as images shift from shimmering sunsets to rubbish-strewn, windswept beaches and crumbling, abandoned architecture.

Rivers shot the footage for 'Slow Action' at four real locations, which include the rugged, unspoilt bits of Lanzarote and the tiny Pacific island of Tuvalu. The accompanying narration is taken from texts he commissioned from writer Mark von Schlegell, which combine fictional ethnographic details and philosophical thoughts on the subject of island utopias. The result is a seamless, multi-layered mix of actuality and fantasy.

It's a structure Rivers has used more ambiguously but with equally emotive effect in previous short films, including 'This is My Land' and 'Origin of the Species'. Whereas those films were based on the lives of actual individuals rather than imagined societies, the subject of 'Slow Action' intentionally allows the fictional input to be more obvious and also an element of humour to creep in - Hiva's Anus Isle, for example, is described in deadpan tones as 'a stinkswamp islet, rich in natural gas and dingleberries'. And the battle-driven island of Somerset is named after the county the artist himself comes from.

It's Rivers's acute understanding of the conventions of documentary film - the use of sound and music and how to manipulate and subvert them - that enables him to layer all this together to create fictional space that can feel every bit as real as actual space.

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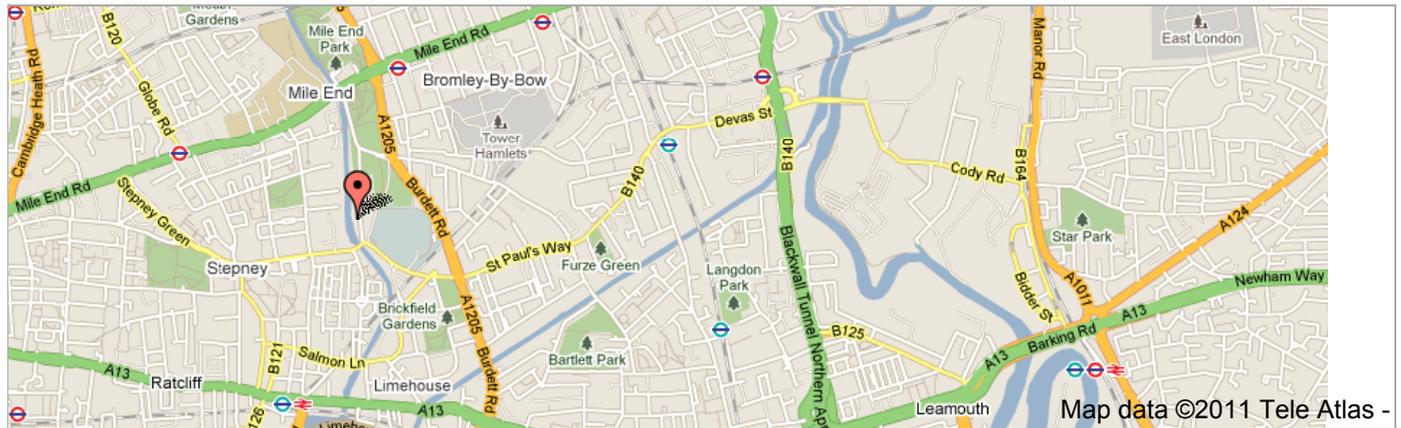
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