

G A S W O R K S

James N. Kienitz Wilkins: *Hearsays*
20 September—16 December 2018

Gasworks presents *Hearsays*, the first solo exhibition and a major new commission by Brooklyn-based artist and filmmaker James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

Hearsays comprises two moving image works: the HD video *Indefinite Pitch* (2016, 23 min.) and the newly commissioned virtual reality (VR) film *The Dynamic Range* (2018, 18 min.). These are shown alongside a single photographic print, titled *The Second Person* (2018). **Please note** that *Indefinite Pitch* plays on the hour and half past during opening times.

Kienitz Wilkins' work combines documentary sources with original scriptwriting to investigate the role that narrative plays in the construction of truth. Characterised by an economy of means, his existing works span a range of mediums, from 16mm and Beta SP through to high definition video. They also engage with issues that relate directly to his personal life, such as race relations in New England, where he grew up, or labour conditions in the digital age, which he contends with every day. The results are both funny – full of wordplay, wisecracks and ideas collapsing in upon other ideas – and provocative – peppered with matter-of-fact observations and fragments of uncomfortable truth that cut like knives.

The Dynamic Range refers to the ratio of the brightest light to the darkest shadows in an image. Made up of sequence information from a lightless image – a video camera filming with the lens cap on – it is a photographic film that does not feel at all photographic. Originally commissioned for planetarium format and adapted for VR, the co-existence of the two versions of the work is essential to how it has been conceived. In the VR rendering, the sound of pan flutes against a pitch-black dome only emphasises the isolation of this poor, yet far more accessible, remodelling of the planetarium experience. The blackness, which starts out fuzzy, becomes sharper over time and gradually gets broken up by more and more bright specks of light, later summed up by the phrase 'a darkness, with detail'.

Delivered by a Morgan Freeman impersonator, the narrative troubles the fundamentals of truth and belief through a reflection on the conditions of cinema today. Poking fun at audio-visual fetishism in particular, this reaches an absurd crescendo in the digital kiosk of B&H Photo in New York City, where men can be found 'fiddling and testing and praying to their Gods that perhaps this device, this specific, newly forged vessel from the future will be the one to bring it all to life.'

Presented in the adjacent gallery, *Indefinite Pitch* opens with a slow-moving slideshow of high definition, black-and-white images of the scummy surface of the Androscoggin, a 'filthy, troubled, beautiful river' that crosses the US states of New Hampshire and Maine. Against this backdrop, Kienitz Wilkins confidently pitches a movie that he would like to make in Berlin, New Hampshire, an 'archetypal American town'. The plot goes like this: mysterious fires plague a local paper mill, a stranger moves to town, money is stolen, a mystery unravels. But it is soon confessed that this storyline was actually stolen from *The Masked Menace*, a lost 1927 American drama serial mostly filmed in Berlin. The fast-paced, first-person narrative continues this habit of folding back in on itself throughout the film, as ideas are expressed and contradicted, and key words and references recur in different contexts and forms. Kienitz Wilkins's voice also progressively shifts pitch, while he reflects on the various meanings of the word: a movie pitch, the pitch of a river, a name for the resin produced by plants, a baseball pitcher, and so on.

Two-thirds of the way through, a piercing siren interrupts the monologue, and a disconcerting account of the local political situation begins to creep in at the seams: ‘The Governor of Maine, a guy from Lewiston named Paul LePage is all freaked out. Blamed the heroin problem on drug dealers named ‘D-Money’, ‘Smoothie’, ‘Shifty’, y’know, guys coming up from the South to impregnate white girls.’ Along with references to recent spikes in arson, heroin use, and membership of white supremacist organisations, it is at this intersection of politics and fiction, truth and hearsay, that *Indefinite Pitch* slowly but steadily accumulates into a caustic critical reflection on life, fear and aspiration in small-town America.

Presented in amongst these two films, *The Second Person* is a manipulated lens-based photograph of an image from the NASA image library, a public domain archive. Taken during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, it shows astronaut Neil Armstrong, camera in hand, reflected at distance in Buzz Aldrin’s helmet. It is therefore technically a self-portrait in which Aldrin is a carrier for the photographer, and one of only a few images of Armstrong, who took most of the photographs during the lunar mission. In addition to the indefinite subject of this particular image, however, Kienitz Wilkins is interested in the moon landing more generally as the ultimate ‘tall tale’ and material for rumour, which endures in a new era of paranoia and conspiracy theories. As he writes, ‘compared to what people are trafficking in these days, it almost seems mundane or quaint, and is rooted in cinema (directed by Stanley Kubrick)’. Filling a conceptual gap between the largely first- and third-person monologues that drive the two films, this work also captures his long-term interest in found materials and public access. In this case, however, questions of ownership and copyright are only further exacerbated by the fact that this subtly edited photograph of an archival image is offered up for private sale as a limited-edition artwork.

Hearsays is commissioned and produced by Gasworks. The planetarium format version of *The Dynamic Range* was originally commissioned by Aily Nash with the support from the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York through their MOBIUS Fellowship Program.

VR Operating Instructions for *The Dynamic Range*

1. Put on headset
2. If screen says ‘Enter VR mode’, press and hold red button on handset to begin
3. If/when screen says ‘The Dynamic Range’, tilt head up to begin
4. After a few seconds, the image will be dark with audio
5. Cup hands over ears for better sound
6. Do not press any other buttons. If headset isn’t working, ask at the front desk for help.

Hearsays Events

***This Action Lies*, 14 November, 6:30pm, £10**

Tate Modern

Gasworks collaborates with Tate Film on a screening of new and recent moving image works by James N. Kienitz Wilkins. The screening includes the UK premiere of the short film *This Action Lies* (2018), presented alongside the medium-length movie *Mediums* (2017). Both films explore themes of language, performance and media technologies, using monologue as a way to fuse original scriptwriting with documentary sources. The screening will be followed by a Q&A with the artist.

155 Vauxhall Street, London SE11 5RH
gasworks.org.uk +44(0)20 7587 5202 info@gasworks.org.uk @GasworksLondon

Gasworks is the hub of

**TRIANGLE
NETWORK**

Registered charity no. 326411
Registered company no. 1646688



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**