

BROOKLYN RAIL

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PLENTY OF CAUSES FOR CONCERN BAM's Migrating Forms



“You can bet that the rest of the world is looking at America and trying to assess our sincerity when we talk about brotherhood and equality.”

This line marks the final moments of William Greaves’s deeply affecting 1968 television documentary, *Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*. The film, a portrait of black political and economic aspiration during some of the most dramatic moments of the civil rights movement, screened as part of a Greaves retrospective at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Migrating Forms festival in December. The screening’s timing could not have been more appropriate. Amid a swelling national conversation about the tensions between communities of color and urban police departments, it was no surprise that the post-screening discussion turned into a passionate community forum exploring links between then and now. “What I see on the screen is exactly what I’m experiencing today,” remarked one young woman, pointing out the film’s emphasis on the stratification of black communities.

Watching Greaves’s film during the height of protests over the role of police officers in the deaths of unarmed black men—Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and others—was harrowing. But so too was the news later that week that two N.Y.P.D. officers were shockingly murdered on the job at point-blank range. These events recontextualized the indignation that is fueled by the film and on display in American streets. They provided a reminder that the clarity of any political mission can be fleeting if not outright spectral.

The remainder of Migrating Forms echoed that lack of clarity. Its curators described the eclectic exhibition as “a broad spectrum of contemporary film and video practices,” and you’d be forgiven for finding the curatorial vision a bit distractible in its variety. But the result was a provocative sample: not only of a wide range of film and video practices, but the wide range of thorny political concerns that film and video can document, explore, and deconstruct. Topically, race in America met with other headline-worthy issues, from North Korean national identity, to disaster preparedness, to surveillance and military culture. And the Greaves retrospective collided with several contemporary essay documentaries, as well as a sampling of video art produced more for the gallery than the cinema.

In terms of this latter category, the marquee was Cory Arcangel’s *Freshbuzz* (2013 – 14), a full-hour screen capture of his wanderings around the Subway sandwiches website and social media properties. There was also Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe’s short *The Floating Chain* (2014), described by the artists as “a semiotic Rube Goldberg machine.” In this 20-minute piece, a steady stream of tracking shots is filled with meticulously staged, psychedelically colorful product

displays. *The Floating Chain* is built from the excesses and discards of consumer society, but it doesn't express much anxiety about the consequences of throwaway culture. Rather, it seems exuberant about the manic carnival of stuff that we can all enjoy: all is well, just so long as we take the right drugs, put on the right soundtrack, and smile behind a pair of Ray-Bans.

Among the documentaries, the tone was more deliberative, but *Migrating Forms* still spotlighted plenty of aesthetic experimentation. John Reilly and Stefan Moore's *The Irish Tapes* (1975) explores Northern Ireland's volatile ethno-religious conflict through a quite early, and deliriously glitchy use of Sony Portapak video cameras. Heinz Emigholz's *The Airstrip: Decampment of Modernism, Part III* (2014) is a quiet and contemplative global travelogue exploring modernist architectural monuments. He photographs these buildings from a variety of partially skewed angles, sometimes subtly, but often quite dramatically. Emigholz's framings make it feel as if the buildings are falling into the sea, suggesting that the entire built fabric of "Western modernity" is a house of cards.

Two films in particular, however, cemented the sense of *Migrating Forms* as an incisive portrait of contemporary political concerns. Lance Wakeling's wistful first-person essay, *Field Visits for Chelsea Manning* (2014), finds him traveling the world in pursuit of Manning's irrecoverable biography. Wakeling introduced the film as "an omni-directional narrative," following the director's whims from Kuwait to Quantico, Virginia. He combines a patchwork of text from Manning's Article 32 military hearings with brief interviews, and long stretches of the landscapes through which Manning transited. This oblique exploration of Manning's character helps Wakeling to graze a range of anxieties tied to American ideology, iconography, and geopolitics.

Wakeling's tone was sharply contrasted with the video artist Stanya Kahn's *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014). In this featurette, several bands of ill-trained first responders, all wearing blue medical scrubs, weather the post-apocalypse by squatting in the gauche McMansions of exurban Kansas City. Make no mistake: regardless of the disaster, interior design elements like recessed lighting and tray ceilings will live on. And as long as there is a cellular signal nothing can save you from the hell of customer service representatives.

Despite these tropes, it would be a true mistake to dismiss *Don't Go Back to Sleep* as a tired rehashing of suburban anomie. Much of Kahn's vision is embedded in the dialogue, which spans the romantic advice of a jaded divorcee to the mansplaining of a bearded twentysomething—the most insufferable brand of emotionally stunted philosophy major. There's also a lot of talk of invasive species and disturbed soil, particularly agriculture and the finer points of the food supply. We hear endless chatter about cow's milk, which the team bottles, ferments, and pours on wounds to stave off the alien infection or invasion.

Who are these misfits? Are they a community of science or of religion? Is it a cult, a random band of survivors, or a group of professionally trained first responders? Who knows, and who cares? The bottom line is we're all idiots, and we don't stand a chance.

What happens if we put *Don't Go Back to Sleep* and *Field Visits for Chelsea Manning* into conversation with *Still a Brother*? The earnestness of Greaves's social documentary is a far cry from Kahn's carnivalesque satire, but all three films suggest a common question: is an inclusive, just, or sustainable American future possible? To this question, *Migrating Forms* offers a truly tragic suggestion—that we're mired in so many problems of our own making, and there's little cause for hope that we can turn the corner when disaster strikes.