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AGENCY OF TIME: AN INSTALLATION BY LEIGHTON PIERCE

Leighton Pierce
Sheldon Museum of Art

AN IMAGE FROM LEIGHTON PIERCE'S 2006 VIDEO "MY PERSON IN THE WATER"

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AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Leighton Pierce uses film, video and sound to create transformative experiences for viewers in time-based media. He creates multi-channel, site-specific installations as well as single channel works. His award-winning short films and videos have been exhibited at museums and film festivals throughout the world, including the Whitney Biennial and film festivals in San Francisco, New York and Rotterdam.

He has had retrospectives at The Lincoln Center, The Cinémathèque Francaise, Festival Nemo and Pompidou Center in Paris, and at The Lisboa Bienal of Contemporary Art. Pierce has received fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, The Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and

The Camargo Foundation. He teaches and directs the Film and Video Production Program in the Department of Cinema and Comparative Literature at the University of Iowa.

Sharon Kennedy, interim curator at the Sheldon Museum of Art, interviewed Leighton Pierce about his work and his Sheldon installation, Agency of Time.

Please describe your artistic process particularly in the work you have created for Sheldon.

In the simplest terms, a film or a video can be considered to be a meaningful experience in time. As a filmmaker, I take that as my mission: through the use

of image and sound, I am composing an experience for the audience. My goal is to affect emotion without engaging identification and to work at the fringes of abstraction to alter sensation. Just as in music, the degree of engagement in a particular piece arises out of a balance between, on the one hand, the known, the comprehensible, and predictable with, on the other hand, the unknown, the abstract, and unexpected.

When working on an installation, the situation is a bit different. The goal still includes making a meaningful experience in time, but I also work to make a space meaningful. In other words, I try to alter the meaning of a space and try to induce the viewers to linger in the space.

In preparing for the Sheldon installation I was working on several parallel processes simultaneously. First, I was gathering images and sounds. This is the first project in which my imagery has been entirely constructed from thousands of digital still images.

The subjects in your earlier work focused on your children, domesticity, and your immediate surroundings, although how the work is presented — the process — seems to be equally if not more important than the subject. How would you compare your earlier work with your more recent work?

I have always looked to my immediate surroundings when I gather material for my films and videos. I don't think of them as domestic or even diaristic, even though others have suggested so. It has more to do with the fact that I practice my art wherever I am. When my children were young and I was spending a lot of time caring for them, they tended to be my subjects. Lately, I find myself doing other things and turning my attention to other subjects. But more accurately, my pieces are rarely about the thing I point my camera at. Rather those images tend to become material that, through editing and the interaction of

my editing style has changed radically due to the significant technological differences that digital video introduced about 10 years ago. Film editing is slow and linear. Digital editing is fast and presents the finished product almost immediately. In film, any kind of layering or fade effects were an exercise in imagination until the final print was made.

Editing digital video allows me to see layers and fades and dissolves immediately. Because of this, I have developed a way of editing that is much more similar to mixing audio than editing film. In audio you have multiple simultaneous tracks and you might adjust the relative volumes of each over time. I am doing the same thing with video tracks in my recent work, creating a flow of transforming imagery rather than cuts between shots.

And now, for this Sheldon project, the ability to seamlessly integrate still photographs into a video timeline has allowed it to have the look that it has.

perhaps by shooting it from very close causing limited focus, makes it somewhat strange. If I present objects or people that are identifiable but not quite fully known — just a little strange — then there is engagement from the viewer. It is the questions in a viewer's mind — "what is it?" or "what does it mean?" or "why does that image follow?" — that arouse that viewer's attention.

So in a sense, I am looking to create an environment wherein an aroused viewer is encouraged to associate inwardly in the presence of engaging stimuli on the outside. This is not unlike the process of meditation. It is not unlike walking down the street in an attentive way.

The trick for me is to provide just the right amount of abstraction to allow the viewers to engage with their own memory and imagination. If the images are not abstract enough then people just watching a movie in the usual follow-along way that we tend to fall into. Much of this work is done by the soundtrack as well.

I am developing this technique as yet another way to examine the visual markers of time. I shoot these images and then start to edit them into short segments of about a minute in length. These segments then become my "shots," which I edit together to create flowing and intertwining streams of association.

While I am creating and actually discovering my shots, I am also designing the physical presentation of the videos in the gallery. I only visited the gallery once but considered the relatively low ceiling, and the wall with two doors, and also in a way, the stunning flatness of the Nebraska countryside. Thinking about these factors, I decided to accentuate the lowness and the flatness by designing three very wide and short screens arranged side by side positioned opposite the wall with two doors. And, to also accentuate the flatness, I designed a single square column in the center of the room thinking that it would define the actual height of the room and imply a "holding up" of a ceiling.

sound, ends up evoking a particular feeling.

I would say then, that one difference between my earlier work and now is that now I feel much less restrained in my approach. The pieces seem to me to be more a part of my body rather than a careful peering out from my mind. On a more material sense, I have moved away from extremely carefully constructed shots toward a more gestural way of shooting. Now it is more that I sense a shot rather than compose it. I shoot a lot and I shoot with care and skill, but the shooting is fast and physical instead of slow and mental.

What method of filmmaking do you currently use? In your opinion has technology been your friend? How has your relationship with technology evolved over your career?

Technology has been my friend. Most significantly,

In much of your work, the imagery is blurred or abstracted. It tends to be confined to a small space and has a meditative quality about it. Is this your attempt to "pay attention." If so, how else do you accomplish this? If this is your intention, where does it come from and what would you like the viewer to experience when engaging with your work?

Much of my past work has been meditative. Since I have yet to see *Agency of Time* installed, I am not sure if this one will have the same effect. But in most of my work, I am committed to causing small but acknowledged changes in a viewer's sense of time, perception, and memory. As I mentioned earlier, I work to accomplish this through a balance of the known and the unknown.

An image of a stone bench, for example, could be presented many ways. By abstracting it through motion blur (the camera moves while photographing) or

You were trained as a musician and later turned to film. Yet in your more recent videos the sound seems very minimal or subtle or is it so precisely placed that the viewer is only vaguely aware of it? What role does sound play in your filmmaking?

In all of my work sound is a huge part of the process. And even though I think of it musically, few others would. I would not call it minimal, but if it works well it does tend to blend with the fabric of the video in a way that makes it seem natural. For example, if one were to listen to my 2006 video "My Person in the Water," one might say that the soundtrack just goes with the imagery of a woman moving and swimming, shot from under the water. In other words, it might seem natural.

In fact, each sound is constructed, layered, processed, and mixed in a way that significantly reshapes the video. It is the soundtrack that structures

the video into "phrases." A sound beginning and then ending defines a phrase in this sense. And each phrase becomes a unit of perceived time. Since the images seem to flow one to the other without a break, it is the sound that actually gives shape to the piece.

It is because sound can seem natural that it gets its force. It is what I call the nothing-up-my-sleeve effect. While we are all busy looking at the image, the sound, slightly below our attention, is creating emotional and temporal effects. This is no different than what happens in well designed conventional narrative movies (*There Will be Blood* is a good recent example), except that I am using it for emotional rather than narrative ends. I am not talking about the music here, but about the musical and emotional effects of the non-musical sounds.
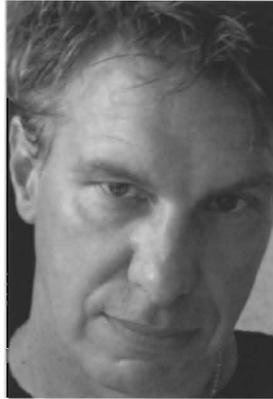
LEIGHTON PIERCE

In a multi-channel installation like *Agency of Time* sound functions differently. Since there are multiple images located within the space, and since the sound comes from speakers located throughout the room, the sound will not become perceptually tied to any particular image. Instead, the sound becomes part of the actual room environment. Therefore, when designing the sound for an installation, I tend to think in broader terms. It creates an acoustic coloring of the entire space and supports the images in that sense.

Your work has been described as "a painting slowly transforming." What artists have been an influence on you? Any painters? What other aspects of your life have an effect on the outcome of your work? It has also been referred to as poetic. What does that mean to you?

This is always a tough question to answer since it is hard to trace direct influences. I certainly look at films and videos and at paintings. For six years I have been married to a painter. I could list my favorite filmmakers and painters but I think of my main deeper influences as coming from other sources.

Strangely, in some ways I think the practice of making Raku pottery on a wheel when I was in art school has had a deep influence. This is a tradition steeped in Zen. It is a time-based event — one can only work the pot for so long before it falls apart.

There is an aesthetic embracing of imperfection. And the firing is fast and active and physical. The white hot pot is removed from the kiln with tongs and placed in leaves that ignite and alter the glaze in only vaguely predictable ways. This entire process had a beautiful balance of control and lack of control that still permeates my work.

And the physicality of it is very similar to the active way I shoot. I think my attraction to jazz — Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis, Anthony Braxton, etc. — and my rudimentary training in that form comes from a similar interest in balancing a determined structure with indeterminate influences.

I also read a lot in cognitive psychology; I am very interested in the fluid relationships among emotion, perception, and cognition. It is difficult to say how this integrates into my work directly. But I do think that, in some ways, I am doing the same thing these scientists are doing but without controls.

When I am looking for inspiration when editing, I turn to classical and contemporary music and to poetry. I am currently reading Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Hass; I'm listening to Beethoven, Paul Shoenfeld, and Shostakovich.

You were recently in Bellagio, Italy on a Rockefeller Fellowship. What else is in the offing?

Yes, I was at the Rockefeller Bellagio Center shooting and editing in April 2008. I also recently received a Creative Capital Foundation Grant to support the full development of *Agency of Time*. The Sheldon installation is the preliminary version of what I see to be a much larger project. The final version will have up to 15 video channels and eight audio channels.

And in an exciting new turn, I am compiling photographs for a book. As I mentioned, the video streams that make up *Agency of Time* are all constructed from individual still photographs. As a way to explore scale and time in yet another form, I am selecting and sequencing some of those images for exhibition and publication.

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