

## PETROLIA – A FILM BY EMILY RICHARDSON

In her short 'documentary' film *Petrolia* Emily Richardson consolidates her position as a visual artist with a visionary capacity. Her remarkable film which features oil rigs in Scotland's Cromarty Firth and most memorably the sprawling Grangemouth oil refinery, lasts a mere twenty minutes but in that time exposes in the most persuasive terms the insecure relationship between the natural landscape and the brute physical manifestation of human energy resource excess. The ruthless exploitation of oil reserves in the North Sea is her principal concern here and how overwhelming the incongruity of industry within a previously unspoiled landscape now pinioned for the plunder of its natural resources. Watching Richardson's haunting images, one is made all too aware of the monstrous delusion in clinging to the notion of a species somehow in control of its own 'progress'. Richardson seeks through her art to deliver an alternative more unsettling impression of seemingly innocuous commercial activity, unearthing apocalyptic associations which are vividly communicated through the film image. This insight is achieved through a relentless yet strangely serene and hypnotic tracking of the prey. All Richardson shows is the rigs and refineries going about their daily business. She records very effectively over long time lapse sequences the refineries 'activity', much as the nature documentary maker records the actions of primates or invertebrates. The industrial phenomena are the players here, their nature and actions observed with a metaphysical implication their developers had not accounted for. In their monotonous daily movements they inadvertently leak their secrets to the Richardson lens which stands rooted to a nearby hilltop or sheep fold for days, monitoring a language intelligible only to the silence which will follow their inevitable demolition. Her short film effortlessly unveils the malign forces of technological detachment when machines have grafted themselves uninvited onto the natural landscape. The rigs and refineries have become almost living organisms through Richardson's lens, surreal crustaceans taking their sustenance from the terrain they have devoured. These organisms one senses are hard at work in their honeycomb of gradual self-destruction, absolutely concerned with themselves, blind and unaccountable, sometimes eerily beautiful in their play but always criminal. Perhaps what Richardson has done is to show us these soon to be abandoned constructions as tragic doppelgangers of the estranged freaks we, the flawed reinventors of ourselves have become on a planet that could have tolerated us had our ambitions not reached levels of impossible parasitical indulgence.

Using 16mm film and the time lapse photography with long exposures to alert colours to their richer intensities, Richardson warps our habitual one dimensional visual reality and toys with the senses to great effect. She ensures the viewer experiences a

psychological overhaul in their capacity as witness and observer. Once seen, it is hard to imagine the oil fields and refineries as anything but how they appear in the film; the rigs and outlandish platforms scuttling back and forth with their tug entourage, spider like sci-fi creatures sprouting cranes and drilling paraphernalia in a ceaseless flood of light, static and fast changing weather patterns. Most disturbing of all, the Grangemouth oil refinery at night ablaze with fluorescence, a terrifying tubular derangement of pipes and towers pouring steam and smoke, the pollution drawn out one way by the coastal wind as if from a charging locomotive. Grangemouth, constructed in the 1950's, somewhat scaled down now compared to its original bloated dimensions, is even so still the size of a small town. It squats in the landscape, a repulsive giant metallurgical toad, a fabulous absurdity in thrall to eventual redundancy. In contrast the rigs which are drawn in and out of the bay to be serviced, skate like pond life over the surface of the ever-alternating shades of the sea. Quite still and serene they stand rooted in ebony or fibrillating silver, then seeming determined to communicate their continued relevance they signal their satellites with the abrupt swinging out or nodding up and down of a crane. The effect is faintly comical but also displays that sinister sense of the robotic, the entity which is no longer governed by its master.

Stretched by time lapse Richardson's images appear hallucinated but at the same time so valid, so 'natural'. There is absolutely nothing contrived, distressingly polemic, or pretentious in this work. I say this because in the hands of another artist who might be more likely to actively 'create' shock and disturbance, to launch ceremoniously into expressive overkill, the result would surely be diminished. But Richardson has the valuable ally of calm revelation through what one might call an 'inner distance'. One might conclude that a natural and intuitive ability to control the distillation of her subject through the medium of film gains her access to realities which show themselves to be as phantasmagorical as they are mundane. As a sensitive filmmaker she understands that perpetrators unconscious of or inured to their guilt are their best accusers and allows them to merely parade themselves unwittingly. It seems to me this brief but potent film will be one by which our precarious energy-devouring epoch will be measured. We cannot help feeling Richardson's labour has in the artistic sense cleared a path for us to another viewpoint where we might imagine on a clear day to observe some truth. Given the prospect from that spot being at this hour a profoundly dispiriting one for our beleaguered species, it makes her achievement all the more crucial and courageous.

*Petrolia* was first shown in 2007 at the Lighthouse Museum in Glasgow as part of a show called *6000 miles* about the changing nature of the Scottish coastline and also at

the Whitstable Museum in its *Screenland* exhibition. It was then exhibited in Sunderland as part of a show called *Theatrum Mundi* at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art.

Emily Richardson has worked more recently with the author Ian Sinclair on a film showing how the infrastructure of the London Olympics has impacted on the environment of East London. In 2008 she received a commission from Channel 4 to make a film concerning the landscape of Orford Ness in Suffolk. In the autumn of 2008 her work will be exhibited in Paris.

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