
LONDON

THE SECOND HAND

BY LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS



Corin Sworn's reinscriptions of appropriated media have seen her interpreting a set of slides found in a skip, creating characters who can only speak in the words of cultural documents such as films or books, or redubbing a 1979 teen flick. Her latest work, *The Rag Papers* (2013), recently opened at Chisenhale and soon to move to Aachener Kunstverein, features a male character and a female character occupying the same apartment at different moments in time. An older male character appears to be working on something, whilst a second female character searches through the documents he has left behind there. The voice of a third character interrupts the film, emanating from behind the viewer. Sworn is one of three artists who will represent Scotland at this year's Venice Biennale.

The Rag Papers (production still), 2013. Co-commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery and Neuer Aachener Kunstverein (NAK). Courtesy: the artist and Kendall Koppe, Glasgow

Laura McLean-Ferris Can you tell me how you began in making *The Rag Papers*? What was the starting point for you?

Corin Sworn This is a bit weird: I read Susan Sontag's introduction to the Roland Barthes reader, and while reading it I became really interested in the fact that I stopped being able to distinguish whether I was enjoying Susan Sontag's description of Roland Barthes, or Roland Barthes's ideas. That intertwining of two characters was really fascinating. But, you know, making a film based on the introduction to a reader is a rather odd decision, so over time that got let go. There are still aspects of it that play out in the film.

lmf You retain the fact that a female character is positioned later in time, and appears to be searching for something in the man's work. Though there is some temporal confusion relating to the movement of objects, or in how many cigarettes have been smoked in an ashtray on the desk. Occasionally the characters seem to be sharing a temporal space.

cs There are a bunch of games that go on in terms of time in the film. When there is a cutaway, sometimes that's the suggestion of something happening at the same time in a different space, or sometimes it's a suggestion of something that happened in the past. As this is common in editing, in a way it's a film language that allows me to play with those temporal moments or structures.

lmf In *Endless Renovation* (2010) you created a voiceover for a slide show that suggested a potential interpretation for a set of slides that had been found in a skip. Does this relate to the moment when the female character of *The Rag Papers* appears to be trying to interpret a set of images that she finds in the flat?

cs Yes. For that project I found some slides in a trash bin and decided I wanted to spend time with them, to imagine where they came from or whose they were, without doing all that much research into their actual origin. They came from outside a house, so I could have actually found out who lived there and what they did. Instead, I tried to read the images themselves, because I was interested in exploring what it is that a viewer does in an art space. In so many social spaces that we look at, we are told what we are seeing—these are the vacuum cleaners and this is the lingerie section. In an art gallery, though, you go in and there's this question of "what is this?" and so the process of thinking through things, or attending, trying to understand, is a very active process. I think the female character mirrors an attempt to understand, in the way the viewer is attempting to understand what is going on.

lmf There are quite a lot of trip-ups that send the viewer on various associative tangents. For example, the footage of enormous second-hand clothing depots. Can you tell me about the process of bringing these scenes in?

cs I think the action of trying to understand or looking or seeing how you can use what's in front of you is mirrored in the scenes of the people searching through second-hand markets. You go through these spaces and you find objects and you think about if you can reuse them or if they could be refashioned. So that's a different use of information, and a cobbling together of agency, I think. I conceived of the network of reuse as quite a local phenomenon, but then I had a later realisation that it is global, to an enormous extent, and that global network has ramifications that I had never been able to picture or imagine, due to their breadth and enormity. Being able to point to, or image, the expansiveness of global flows of goods is difficult, because you grapple with trying to understand something and it floods away from you, because it's almost too much. It's seeing something that you can understand, as much as glimpsing something that you can't understand.

lmf It's not until someone points out that there is an enormous island of floating carrier bags, or a strange, concrete example such as this, that you can get any kind of a handle on such huge processes.

cs What happens to all this stuff? You can ask the question but you can't really answer it. That's why I was excited about being able to go to the rag yard in Vancouver and film the shots of the clothing depots. There you do get a feeling of the sublime—in the more traditional art historical sense. It's terrifying how much stuff there is. They warned me about walking too close to certain areas because the clothes are made into huge bales, and they can fall on you. It's a little bit like those sublime paintings of the moment before an avalanche of snow.

lmf Your most direct appropriation is of the film *Over the Edge*, a film about a group of disenfranchised teenagers from 1979, which you re-edited and redubbed for your work *After School Special* (2009). What drew you to that film in particular?

cs I was interested in the way *Over the Edge* didn't just happen on the screen. It also happened when people memorized lines from the film and parroted them back to each other, like adolescents in a park. I saw the film and I realized that I already knew it, because when I was a teenager lots of people memorized the lines from it. So I got really excited because I had an understanding of the film through the way that people used it or traded it.

lmf This goes back to the interest in experiencing something second hand, but also of cultural material moving out of its original context and into the world, into people's subjectivities.

cs Yes, and I thought it's a totally different film than the way people traded it. So I thought maybe I could re-edit it to suggest that people sometimes watch a rather different film from the dominant narrative, they render their own bricolage from their experience of it. The lines from films were often used to perform exercises that were anti-authority—they were talking back exercises. And in the film those actions of talking back are quite cynically depicted. They're not really fruitful. But teenagers were using them in a heroic way.

lmf Did *The Lens Prism* emerge out of that work, in the way that the main character speaks by using the words of others?



Lens Prism (production still), 2010.
Courtesy: the artist and Kendall Koppe, Glasgow

cs The way the character in *The Lens Prism* exists in culture is by appropriating or understanding or narrating other cultural figures. So he is produced through his reflection or interpretation of the world around him, quite literally. Therefore he plays many figures. He plays out a Chris Marker figure by re-narrating *La Jetée* (1962), for example. He is a character based on the other characters that he narrates, and in the end he is in a kind of subjective crisis. He's at the doctor and he's trying to explain a very basic sensation, and even then, instead of saying that he can't describe it, he says "I can't remember". So even his ability to relay himself in the present is disturbed by constantly narrating himself or trying to interpolate himself through his cultural surroundings.

lmf It's a beautiful idea, that of a character that is almost empty other than the elements of narrative culture that have created him: a chameleon of the voice with no centre. It's an interesting way of thinking about the fact that everyone, to some extent or another, is created partly by these cultural inputs.

cs Yes, and we also create ourselves by the way that we interpret that culture around us.

lmf It seems that the idea of the "second-hand" runs through much of your work. From hearing ideas, words or stories second-hand, to the reuse of objects, to appropriated cultural material that is granted new significance. How do you think of appropriation, and the debates, legal or otherwise, which surround this way of working?

cs I think of it as an educational critique. There is a long history of copying as a form or learning. In Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–1863), the composition of the main figures is taken from Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving *The Judgement of Paris* (c. 1515), which is itself taken from a drawing by Raphael. But the history of art and how art works is not that interesting to a legal court. So I feel that there are histories of appropriation, when it comes to intellectual property, that are being ignored. And it's the same in many aspects of general life—people are always appropriating things and reusing them. It's a kind of generalized creativity, an aspect of life.

lmf So there is a creation of agency in the appropriation of material for everyone, not just artists, and also in using materials to alter or answer back to the culture that presented it to you.

cs It's like when you go through a shopping mall and there's some number one hit, and everywhere you go you hear the number one hit, and suddenly you can't help but sing the number one hit, and it's driving you crazy. And if later you decide that you would like to take the piss out of this thing that bombarded you as a social subject, you can then be prosecuted. It gets to feel like sometimes culture is really inflicted upon us, and it's really important that we are also allowed to answer it or to do something else with it.