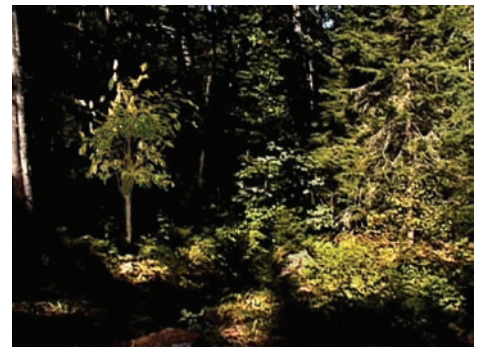


kelly richardson



the edge of everything



front cover: *Wagons Roll (The Remake)*, digital video, 2003 / 2007 • left to right above: *Camp*, video, 2 min., 2001; *A car stopped at a stopsign in the middle of nowhere in front of a landscape*, digital video, 30 min., 2001; *Howthedevel*, digital video, 2002,

Peril, Glee

Decades ago, Andy Warhol was interviewed about some of his extremely lengthy films and how audiences might consider them. He responded with typical aplomb: Well, look at them, then walk away. Then, come back and look at them again later. Look at them like you look at paintings. It was a remark that discarded any narrative imperative and reiterated film's image-based actuality. Is Warhol's *Empire* about anything? Ambition? Imperialism? Sure, why not. Yet, fixated on a single image, *Empire* also articulates, in gorgeous black and white, an acute awareness of the present moment. There is a dogged insistence that you consider this moment. And all that implies. Beauty. Uncertainty. Expectation. Possibility.

In one of Kelly Richardson's earliest videos, 2001's *Camp*, a fixed image of the moon at night is subtly affected by the rising vapors of a campfire and accompanied by the sound of popcorn popping. It is low-tech and simplistic and some viewers might have dismissed it as an unfulfilled joke with no punchline. But *Camp* exemplifies qualities of much of the video work that Richardson would subsequently produce. The cheapest of cheap tricks, it contains a specific effect applied to a single, persistent image. The added detail of popping popcorn undercuts the solemnity with a touch of comic absurdity, while that absurdity itself deepens the moment and makes more resonant its underlying humanity. There's a lot going on when you're looking at the moon.

These elements arise again and again in Richardson's videos. Whatever action there is, takes place as a localized event within the image, amplifying the tension within an otherwise relatively still image. *A car stopped at a stopsign in the middle of nowhere in front of a landscape* appears just as described, with the added detail of a clouded sky scrolling by—the initial absurdity of the image is elongated by the visual cue of time, as depicted in

a certain action. In some real sense, Time often functions as the protagonist of Richardson's videos—within the scene depicted and within the viewer viewing.

There are no other protagonists. Even within scenes where one might expect a human figure, none are evident. Instead, Richardson is enfolded the viewer into successive imaginary spaces within which the essential ingredients are simultaneity of action and sensation. Action—even when limited—repeats forever. Sensation—borne of repeated action and a seductive, engrossing image—blossoms to fill and expand the moment. There is no single endpoint to this heady blend of elements—Richardson's works evoke the complex and contradictory sensation of life: anxious, hilarious, ominous, rapturous.

Howthedevel, in which a quiet scene in the woods is unhinged by a lone, epileptic bush, is both disquieting and funny. It has the aura of a revelatory moment, but a jittery rather than a burning bush sidesteps any onerous biblical connotations, minimizing the mythic and emphasizing the pathetic. But in Richardson's work, pathos and absurdity are the keys to the kingdom because if one perceives peril in a Richardson video—and a jittery bush has an edge of peril about it, as does a car stopped in the middle of the desert—one must also recognize there is no small portion of glee sharing the image.

In one of the few videos where Richardson utilizes a moving image, *Ferman Drive*, the repetitive banality of tracking across a row of suburban homes begins to feel much like a still image. The rhythmic sameness rolls by for quite a while before the punchline hits the viewer and its impact is all the more powerful because of the patience Richardson employs before delivering it. With a setting so familiar, real, and banal, *Ferman Drive* typifies Richardson's method of proposing the implausible as plausible. It works because the ordinary is so carefully wrought. Richardson is not depending upon subtlety. Her gestures are overt and obvious, which makes it more critical that they be convincing gestures

in and of themselves, blatant and beautiful lies that you must believe before they reveal any truth.

A key element to these convincing realities is the perpetual use of ambient, understated soundtracks. Richardson's sound choices do not heighten reality in the startling manner of her exaggerated visual motifs. If anything, the persistently ordinary character of her soundtracks are a subtle but effective tool for grounding what are often preposterous visuals. Like a minor key, this subtlety slides by almost unnoticed but enables us to find the incredible that much more authentic.

The hidden layer in Richardson's work is that her videos since *Camp* have involved an increasingly arduous process. Warhol's painting allusion is not merely relevant to an image-based comparison between media. To arrive at a satisfaction with the precision of illusion—not to mention auditory cues—she is pursuing, Richardson still invests a painter's time and process to her work. Initial photography by the artist is augmented through numerous post-production elements, including color saturation, the manipulation of stock images purchased from film suppliers, hand-masking and repeating images, and final rendering of the finished work, which can easily take several weeks or even months.

Her more recent videos increasingly reflect this buffing of production values, but the central premise of a perilous glee remains constant. In contrast to many visual artists who have appropriated the deep reservoirs of cinema history for their work, often to compelling effect, Richardson creates her own imagery by adopting cinematic tropes, particularly its potential for startling moments of acuity, including her increasingly adept use of deep, rich colors and her transition to a panoramic aspect ratio. If we are still talking about an expansive sense of presentness and possibility, these technical flourishes expand the moment ever more fully.

In *Exiles of the Shattered Star* (a heartbreaking title, if ever there was one), blobs of fire cascade endlessly from the beautiful twilight sky. It's a work both deeply ominous and weirdly soothing and it is in this contradictory space that Richardson situates the viewer, locked and loaded in the Now. Richardson is not remarking on the disintegration of our livable environment or foretelling apocalypse (the work loops, so there is no disastrous dénouement), but these allusions are essential to feeding the ambience emanating from the work. Yes, the sky is falling. And ain't it grand?

Forest Park, a new two-channel video, operates as a visual companion to *Exiles*. A wide stretch of weeded land, the site of a pending housing development, is crowned by the burgeoning twilight sky and dotted with a delicate array of streetlights hovering over the scene. With the flickering lights visually mimicking

the soundtrack of crickets, *Forest Park* emits the same hypnotic allure as *Exiles*. The scenery is more sedate but there is the same sense of dark forboding. And it is similarly irresistible, as though we are being wrapped in something so mysterious we might call it anxious euphoria.

Can you extract glee—however unspecific and inarticulate—from peril and unease, and what does it mean to do that? In Richardson's work, it becomes a matter of very specific faith—not in creed or creed, but in possibility. When your universe consists of a series of interminably extended moments, there is always ample room for possibility, no matter the circumstance. In *Wagons Roll*, a car hangs in mid-air against a range of mountains and blue cloud-dotted sky, a plume of dust shooting from its rear. The average pop-saturated viewer will immediately recall Thelma and Louise and the freeze-frame image that ends that famous film is a somewhat appropriate reference—busting out of boundaries...total individual empowerment...friends to the end...yee haw. Ho and hum.

Richardson employs a light touch that tends to sidestep such thematically obvious broadsides. More accurately, *Wagons Roll* is Richardson's Chuck Jones moment. A longtime animation director, Jones sent Wile E. Coyote off a thousand cliffs, followed by a directional puff of smoke, only to hang in the air before cold reality set in and sent our anti-hero and his desire for roadrunner flesh plummeting in a long, slow drop to reality. Richardson depicts the eternal moment before the fall. It might all collapse but in Richardson's work "might" is a two-way street. It might all come to end in a blaze of absurdity. Then again, we just might make it after all. Even the title of the work points to some indomitable pioneer spirit.

Even Richardson's most bald-faced one liner transforms, in an instant, into an eloquent moment of pluck. A rubber tire lies flat on the road. Then it rouses itself, gets up, and ambles off screen. It is the work with the most gigantic cheek quotient, but it works precisely because it is so overt about its own charm. It is no small proposition to make a rubber tire chaplinesque. Even describing it that way sounds trite, but it's true. Even better, even sweeter, that it looked so harshly pathetic lying on the road under the hot sun.

It's all so blatantly hokey and hilarious and ebullient. That it is titled *The Sequel* and we never know what preceded it is moot. How bad could it have been if you can dust yourself off and move on with such panache? But hokum and hilarity are not Richardson's ultimate arbiters of meaning. They are part of a big bag of tricks—conceptual, compositional, technical—employed to suggest that if there is a sword of Damocles hanging over all our heads, it is not only double-edged, but made of rubber.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator



Ferman Drive
digital video, 2005



Forest Park, high definition video, 2 channel widescreen 16:9, 2007



Exiles of the Shattered Star, high definition video, widescreen 16:9, 2001





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Kelly Richardson was born in Canada (1972) where she studied fine art at the Ontario College of Art & Design (AOCAD with honours) and media studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (MFA studies). Her works have been exhibited internationally at various galleries including Le Mois de la Photo a Montreal / Articule, Montreal (2007), Birch Libralato, Toronto (2006), The Nunnery, London, UK (2006), Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, UK (2005), Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2004), Stills Gallery, Scotland (2004), Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Canada (2004), Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2002-2003) and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2002). Her work was recently acquired by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and will be featured in their upcoming exhibition *The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image* (Feb-May, 2008). Additional forthcoming exhibitions include solo shows at the KW|AG, Kitchener, Canada (January-April, 2008) and Birch Libralato, Toronto (July--September, 2008). She lives and works in the United Kingdom. www.kellyrichardson.net

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