

contemporary

MARIA MARSHALL

RICHARD DYER



When I Grow Up I Want To Be A Cooker, 1998. Courtesy (all images): the artist and Team Gallery, New York

A beautiful child gazes unblinkingly into the camera, he is two or three, he is smoking a cigarette. Such is the beauty of the child and of the filmic facture – the rich sepia-tinted tones, the thick white smoke swirling seductively around the angelic face, the camera panning around him in smooth sweeping arabesques – that we do not at first acknowledge the shocking nature of the scenario we are watching. *When I Grow Up I Want To Be A Cooker* (1998), shot on Super-8, was the work that catapulted Marshall to international attention. Of course the child is not really smoking; one of the artist's sons, Jake, is blowing digital smoke rings. The artist's paranoia about the future of her child is projected on to him as the smoke is projected on to the child from another film shoot.

In *Put Medication in His Pocket* (1999) the same child sensuously eats an oyster. Children engaged in adult acts. We feel uncomfortable, unable to halt

the erotic association of oysters as an aphrodisiac, as a prelude to sex. Children and death, children and sex; dangerous subjects, potent subjects. It is this element of danger, unease and confrontation that lends Marshall's work its sense of foreboding, its edgy suspense; it partakes of the quality of the most disturbing sequences of suspense thrillers – Hitchcock, Kubrick, Polanski, even film noir, but with a disturbing Freudian inflection.

In *When Are We There?* (2000) Marshall places herself instead of her children as the principal protagonist. The relationship to cinema is made even more explicit, this time referencing a sequence in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). The camera pans up a marble staircase, then along what seems to be a hotel corridor and suddenly swings into a room. We are confronted with the artist dressed in a simple white dress; she is motionless, staring straight ahead, but



Put Medication in His Pocket, 1999



When Are We There?, 2000



10000 Frames, 2004

Marshall uses the loop to engage the viewer hypnotically in a claustrophobic narrative, in an alternate, concentrated world, where we are invited to focus on a single action, incident or phenomenon.

something is wrong. As the camera closes in on her, like a predatory consuming eye, we see that her skin is literally creeping, puckering and moving, as if she were being mauled by an invisible presence. It is as if the gaze of the camera, and by implication that of the viewer, has become palpable and is assaulting – or caressing – the artist's body, the ambiguity of the contact heightened by the artist's passivity. The Hollywood film *The Entity*, in which a woman is raped by an invisible poltergeist, is a distant echo here. Indeed, Marshall has stated that when she was pregnant she felt violated, and this sense of unbidden invasion is present in much of the work.

In her recent film *10000 Frames* (2004), a trip to Disneyland is speeded up to a manic Keystone Cops acceleration. The artist and her two sons participate in every possible activity at a breathless speed. From the Tower of

Terror to Jurassic Park, their activities are narrated in a stream-of-consciousness voiceover by what appears to be one of the children's voices. In fact, the text is read by Marshall herself, her voice speeded up, making it child-like. The extraordinary fact is that one is actually able to hear and understand every word and its relationship to the images. After a few minutes our perceptual apparatus adjusts to the hyper-velocity of the information stream and it is as if we are watching the film at normal speed. One speculates as to how much more information we could absorb if we consumed it at this level. By collapsing a few days into several minutes, Marshall evokes more accurately the chaotic experience of the Disney trip than would be possible through realist cinematic or documentary methodologies.

Boxer (2003) is shot in grainy, scratched black-and-white 8mm. A young black man emerges from the darkness of a large furnished room, furiously



Above and below: *In 200 days I'll be 11*, 2004

shadow-boxing with the camera to the delicate music-box melody of a nursery rhyme. He approaches closer and closer until he appears to be throwing punches directly at the viewer, as if he is metaphorically returning the violence of the gaze. Marshall does not only employ the loop for the expediency of showing film in a gallery. It is used to engage the viewer hypnotically in a claustrophobic narrative, in an alternate, concentrated world, where we are invited to focus on a single action, incident or phenomenon. Although the visual aspect of the film is a looped sequence, the musical score or narration may change and develop over time, altering our perception of the accompanying imagery. For instance, in *When I Grow Up* six seconds of footage are looped three times while the smoke sequence runs continuously for 18 seconds, giving it time to build up to an impenetrable fog. This is particularly true of a recent work, *In 200 days I'll be 11* (2004). Here the camera pans up from the mouth of a child sucking a lollipop to his narrowed eyes and slowly back down to the mouth and paradoxically stubbled chin. The loop is shot in wide-screen, like a spaghetti western, and indeed the piece is an explicit reference to the genre, and particularly to Clint Eastwood.

But a lollipop has been substituted for Eastwood's signature cigar; as if to redress *When I Grow Up*, the artist is returning innocence to the child.

One of Marshall's most powerful works to date is *Cyclops* (2001–2). Shot using a machine of the same name – a computer-controlled camera rig that can be programmed to follow the same set of choreographed movements as in a previous take – mother and child are 'stalked' by the Cyclops-driven camera in a series of swooping, surveillance-type tracking shots in a two-screen projection. This key work encapsulates some of Marshall's most central concerns – the filmic gaze, and essentially the Lacanian gaze of the mirror, paranoia, the uncanny, vulnerability, the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood, and the mediation of this space through images that destabilize our notions of everyday normality and unearth the unease just below the surface of our relationships to both the other and the world.

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