

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

WILL LAMSON *A Line Describing the Sun*

by Shane McAdams

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As Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said of pornography: “You know it when you see it.” And many say it is so with art: good art can’t be defined, it just hits you at a gut level. I’ve always had my doubts about “the gut justification” (in court opinions or art reviews) but as I chastely entered Pierogi’s Boiler space a few Fridays ago to see a new video installation by Will Lamson, it proved a good place to start a reevaluation.

Will Lamson’s work has never suffered from lack of conceptual focus—even if the imagery or form of a particular piece is atypical, it usually has his fingerprints all over it (though, paradoxically, his work often begins by relinquishing a certain amount of manual control). To unlock the potential drama of this struggle for control, Lamson often uses hazardous accessories like arrows or small explosives in his videos. These leave a deep impression on the viewer, though the artist’s point about control is subtler than they might suggest. So, though his work has the formal dynamism and crispness of an action scene from a John Woo film, it in fact owes more to Bruce Nauman’s mental-straight-jacketed videos and the process and earth works of artists like Jan Dibbets and Richard Long.

His latest work, “A Line Describing the Sun,” is a two-channel video that opens on one channel with a rising sun and on the other with a man dragging what appears to be a rickshaw into a mudflat. The man (Lamson) erects a mirrored contraption on the cart. Then we see a wheel slowly rotating on the left and the artist incrementally tracing a circular path with the cart on the right. When the left channel cuts to a detail of that circular line, the right switches to what appears to be a close-up of a laser beam etching the surface of a phosphorescent rock, crackling as it burns. The left changes again, with a full moon gradually rising in the night sky, while on the right, the scale and nature of this beam of light remains unclear, though it presumably has something to do with the cart and the dark line trailing it. As the fiery line continues its plodding course, a pop here, a flare there register as surprisingly dramatic, even cinematic, despite their simplicity. A fly buzzes into the frame with the impact of a gunfight in a big budget studio production. When the camera finally pulls back, we realize that what we’ve been viewing is an industrial-strength magnifying glass burning a glasslike ring into the vast desert basin. No special effects, no catalysts, just focused sunlight melting rock.

Lamson’s cinematic coup initially hides the rudimentary mechanics of the performance. Only towards the end, when a storm rolls in concealing the sun and extinguishing the beam, does the viewer fall back to earth, comprehend the scope of Lamson’s Sisyphian choreography, and discard a narrative reading of the work. After all, narratives move in arcs and everything in “A Line” moves in loops: the sun, the moon, the earth, the wheels on the cart, and the artist. The images of the approaching storm are Wim Wenders-gorgeous and would do fine as stand-alone, still images. In their grandeur and scale these shots bring to mind some of Robert Smithson’s thoughts on entropy and monumentality, as well as the doomed entomologist in Kobo Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes*, who, like Lamson, fights a futile and absurd battle to control the forces of nature. As the sun disappears and the singeing of the earth ceases, the humanity and poetry of the work steal the show from the landscape.

A 15-foot segment of the blackened earth circle, the lone sculptural element in the show, sits on a raised platform in the back of the gallery space. It works as a curiosity and as an artifact of the video, but is less effective as a sculpture. Though it addresses issues about objecthood and documentation while making an overt gesture toward the history of earth art, it feels a little less natural for Lamson than the videos for which he’s known.

As the video ended and the room went black, the formal disparity within the conceptual unity of Lamson’s catalog invited me to consider how often we overlook unique bodies of work in favor of identifying singular triumphs. When one is struck by a single piece of art, or even an entire show, how informed should that

response be in relation to an overall practice? How much information is necessary for an artist's concept to wrest control from the work's content? Is this the artwork's burden, or ours? It depends, of course, though Lamson's videos often metaphorically broach these very issues. Watching Will Lamson's work evolve over the years, I'm wont to say that, though they often mislead us into thinking we know all we need to without taking a reasoned backstep, our guts do have pretty good instincts. But still, we should proceed with caution. After considering both sides, I'd say the kill move for a good artist is to hit first in the stomach, then the head, and then keep us on the ropes indefinitely.

About the Author

Shane McAdams is a landscape painter and a frequent contributor to the *Rail*.