

Acropolis Cinema presents



April 27, 2016 ~ 8:00PM ~ Automata Theater

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

One of the most singular and unpredictable artists of his generation, Ben Russell has over the course of dozens of films consistently worked to reorient established modes of cinematic expression while training his lens on people and places of underrepresented distinction. Combining experimental ethnography and speculative nonfiction with surrealist imagery and rhythmic overtones, Russell has fashioned a unique corpus which engages all the available senses in a full-tilt push toward transcendence. His two most recent medium-length films, *Greetings to the Ancestors* (2015) and *He Who Eats Children* (2016), utilize dream logic and myth-making as narrative markers through which to examine realities both immediate and imagined in remote regions of South Africa and South America, respectively. Tonight's program bookends these two shapeshifting works with *Daumë* (2000)—one of Russell's key early films and a spiritual precursor to *He Who Eats Children*—and a live performance by the filmmaker in which modular synthesizer and audio-responsive 3D emanations are coupled with randomized outtakes from his *Garden of Earthly Delights* trilogy.

Program:

Daumë (2000, 16mm; 7:00)

He Who Eats Children (2016, video; 25:00) — Los Angeles premiere!

Greetings to the Ancestors (2015, video; 29:00) — Los Angeles premiere!

The Marvels We Now Enjoy (2015, video; 20:00-30:00) — Live performance for modular synthesizer, audio-responsive 3D object, and randomized outtakes from the *Garden of Earthly Delights* trilogy—with text by Levi-Strauss.

Ben Russell by Max Goldberg

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 50 as part of the "50 Best Filmmakers Under 50" feature.

Ben Russell's field studies of transfiguration invoke the magic of cinema with fearsome lucidity. Hollis Frampton might well have been describing Russell's work when he defined invention as "the vivid primary instantiation of a compositional strategy deriving from a direct insight into the creative process itself." Structuralist in their conceptual clarity and analogue poetics, the films take ontology by the teeth: Russell's designs on embodiment require that ideas be performed and the camera taken up as a risk. A punk praxis is at work, one that shares a common root structure with the Providence band Lightning Bolt—catalyst of the incandescent *Black and White Trypps #3* (2007). Certainly, there's good reason to count Russell among those contemporary filmmakers fruitfully engaged in reimagining tropes of ethnographic distance. Where Russell is underrated, I think, is in his daring as a portraitist. Even more than his 13-shot feature *Let Each One Go Where He May* (2009), his serial single-roll reconnaissance flights into the deep structures of ecstasy and trance stand as a major achievement. And they're only getting better: *Trypps #7 (Badlands)* (2010), concerning inner and outer manifestations of the American desert sublime, and *River Rites* (2011), a stunning Suriname canvas flowing in reverse, explode Cartesian dualities with newfound eloquence.

The films come spring-loaded with perceptual surprise, formalizing the liability of unmediated experience through specifically mediated effects. But we would do well to note the subtlety with which the reverse time of Chris Fawcett's magnificent Steadicam in *River Rites* first registers (the film tests what does and doesn't change when directionality is stood on its head). If choreographing the unbroken camera movement against the clock is a relatively straightforward proposition, it's one that resonates on several different levels. There's the paradoxical nature of time, always moving forward as what it represents draws back, finishing in the past to remember the future; the fresh angle on ethnographic knowledge and attendant reflection that temporal dynamics may be as culturally determined as spatial ones; the marvel of Brian Chippendale's cymbal collecting itself into a fine point just as the water's surface returns to calm as boy after boy emerges from their dives with the sudden life of a great painter's sketches (or Maya Deren's dance films). The film's deepest insight is the one that's right under your nose: that everyday gestures and rituals hold their shape no matter the arrow of time. One could imagine a social theorist expanding on this theme for several hundred pages, but Russell gets the essence in a roll of film. With such a revelatory frame for looking it's no wonder the image looks back.

Ethnography Measures

The following is an excerpt of an article written by Acropolis founder Jordan Cronk, originally published at Fandor on November 10, 2013. It's presented here in slightly revised form.

[...] Common critical record would suggest the introduction of the *Trypps* series (2005-2010) as the dawn of Ben Russell's mature period. But many of his early films are amongst his most intriguing, while each evidence, even in nascent form, themes, techniques, and idiosyncrasies that have carried well into his recent output. Crude endeavors such as *The Death of Abraham Lincoln (in Three Parts)* (1998-2000) and *The Breathers-In* (2002), while indelible creations, certainly remain formative, the work of an ambitiously budding filmmaker attempting to reconcile years of ideas and influences. From this mercurial confidence arose many of Russell's most distinctive traits: His employment of manipulated voiceover narration (present in *Terra Incognita* [2002], *The Tawny* [2003], and *The Red and the Blue Gods* [2005]), his penchant for cultural and ahistorical rejoinders (*The Death of Abraham Lincoln*, *Daumë* [2000], *The Twenty One Lives of Billy the Kid* [2005]), and his strange affinity for ghoulish masks, from the keyed-up clown visage in *Abraham Lincoln*, to the lawman-as-swine masquerade in *The Breathers-In*, to the titular break dancing divinities in *The Red and the Blue Gods*.

It's perhaps better to think of the *Trypps* series less as a rebirth than a refinement—or, at the very least, a narrowing of focus. Save for sister films *The Quarry* (2002) and *Terra Incognita*, two meditations on the temporal and spatial continuity of a natural monument located on Easter Island, most of Russell's early work careened through various unrelated impulses. Beginning with *Black and White Trypps Number One* (2005), and continuing on through today, one sees an uncommon focus and thematic dedication emerging on the part of the filmmaker. Both *Black and White Trypps Number Three* (2007) and *Trypps Number Four* (2008) find Russell's aesthetic scale compressing into severe audio-visual experiences, as performances by Rhode Island-based noise rock duo Lightning Bolt and comedian Richard Pryor are concentrated and sent oscillating in mesmeric fashion, both naturally inducing the trance-like state the project portends.

Since then, Russell has dispatched a few more *Trypps* entries, ranging from the placid neon fluo-

rescence of *Trypps #5 (Dubai)* (2008) to the more subjective psychotropic representations of *Trypps #7 (Badlands)* (2010).

In between he has made what are arguably his most substantial works yet. His feature-length debut, *Let Each One Go Where He May* (2009), injected a formal ingenuity into his previously intuitive methodology, presenting 13 single-take sequences of rural and indigenous activity, following two brothers as they travel, backs to the camera, across a vibrant South American topography. One final authorial stroke on the part of Russell during the film's penultimate scene—a feverish display of tribal mythology splashed with the director's trademark grotesqueries—collapses the divide between narrative strands once thought to be of single accord (It's a segment so standalone brilliant that Russell excised and presented it in slightly extended form as the sixth *Trypps* short).

Soon thereafter *River Rites* (2011) would emerge as equally fully formed, and while not nominally a *Trypps* entry, it's certainly of a piece with the greater enterprise. Another bravura single-take symphony of human movement, and soundtracked by another self-explanatory avant-rock troupe, Mindflayer, the film quite literally reverses coordinates, sending bodies hurtling backwards in an arcing, synchronized dance of rhapsodic mobility. Meanwhile, both *Ponce de León* (2012) and his Ben Rivers collaboration, *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* (2013), would initially seem to be forgoing movement in favor of reflection. And while these films do indeed take a more introspective approach, they do so in subtly dynamic fashion, as Russell builds movement, not to mention textual weight, into the compositional framework of the former, while accumulating tension through the seemingly disparate segments of the latter, before building to a musical climax that plays at once as physical exhibition and spiritual exorcism. The thematic preoccupations of these recent films can thus be read as something of a microcosm of Russell's cumulative career: The out-of-body displays in *Let Each One Go Where He May* and *River Rites*, as well as the internalized emotional gradations of the explorers in *Ponce de León* and *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness*, all working toward what has been described by the director as the embodiment of our eternal everything. ♦



Upcoming Events

June 3, 2016 ~ Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues*

Los Angeles premiere of Bi Gan's remarkable feature debut

8:00pm ~ Echo Park Film Center ~ 1200 N. Alvarado St, Los Angeles, CA.

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