

STUDY GUIDE

CHRISTINA BATTLE SPOTLIGHT SERIES

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CHRISTINA BATTLE'S ALCHEMY

If the metaphysical philosophy of alchemy is *solve et coagula*—to separate and join together—we could say that Christina Battle creates alchemy with her films. As the philosopher Henri Bergson explored over a hundred years ago, the most secret and complex ingredient of the alchemical process is not to be found, but experienced as duration, as change over time. We find this as an essential element in the filmic process that Battle explores in her art works. But this duration is staged as impossibility, as mediated moments or virtuality. Thus found footage along with its duration provide a paradoxical fusion at the very core of her growing body of films.

Several of her films explore this issue through still photographs of travel and field recordings, as we see with *map (august 1 to 10, 2003)* or *traveling thru with eyes closed tight (map #2-January 03 thru January 06)*. Battle grounds her travel films not so much in place as in time. *the distance between here and there* (2005) is one of her most abstract, rigorous and beautiful engagements with duration. The film unfolds as a journey: we see diagonal strips of film which cross the screen at different angles. The gold, silver, deep brown and red foreground at once the flatness of the projected surface and its expanse. These images are accompanied by the rhythmic sound of a machine engine, echoing along tracks, receding, and becoming louder to anchor the abstract lines. I could hear a train.

The film's nod to the homologous relationship between the train (or any form of engine) and the cinema uses these emblematic signs of technological modernity to reflect upon the space-time compression that each embeds in contemporary experience, breaking down space to compress and transform the time of travel. Like the train, the cinema allows us to cross spaces, to travel the world, to experience a diversity of places in one sitting (while seated). In Battle's film, it is between here and there, the interval between two points, that marks the experience of travel. The film is able to powerfully evoke that indefinite liminal nowhere, the feeling of being dislocated and in movement.

Yet how is it that we perceive the movement on the screen, the sense of traveling through time? Arguably it is not the looped and manipulated field recording that produces this effect of movement. It is, rather, the photograms of hand-processed colour strips of tape, which were hand-printed and hand-processed again, that create the sensuality of the film. Importantly, it is through the printer and not the camera that the film traces the movement from here to there. The multiple passes of printing, layers of colours that fly by, are stunning as they flicker past our eyes, and the entire film creates the feeling of looking out a train window. Yet there is nothing linear about the trajectory that Battle weaves. There is no original point of departure, but an infinity of relationships that she presents to us.

Although she had studied chemistry earlier, Battle refined her printing and processing techniques during the time that she was employed at Niagara Custom Lab—one of the most important film labs for experimental artists in Canada. While there, she was introduced to the power of colour and the importance of the lab in shaping it. While her earlier work had involved hand-processing, she began to experiment with different film stocks, with ways to push the boundaries of colour processing through timing. She learned to work with contact and optical printers, colour filters, emulsion and tinting. In short, she learned how to paint and sculpt with film.

Her technical knowledge and poetic understanding of the materials of film are perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in her stunning film *buffalo lifts* (2004). Based on footage she found during her research for her Westerns—in particular the diptych, *paradise falls, new mexico* (2004)—the film consists of one silent sequence depicting a buffalo herd running through a field. Battle had been researching the expansion of the railroad in the early 1900s and the demise of the buffalo. The sequence was pulled from a video that she obtained through the public library and re-shot on black-and-white 16mm film. She then hand-processed, colour toned and printed the film to get the deep browns, mauves, greens, yellows and blacks that are reminiscent of cave paintings. She also began to pull the emulsion off the base of the film (a technique known as “emulsion lift”) and re-apply it in a collage, creating a very graphic sense of dislocation. In the same way that the buffalo was “lifted” from our communal experience, so too does Battle lift their image from the emulsion to reflect on their disappearance.

Battle’s fascination with storms, expressed in *fall storm (california 2003)* (2004) and *as storms take shape in the distance* (2007), is very much tied to her interest in discursive systems. Indeed, her research into storm systems is not so much work on the natural environment as it is on how storms are figured in a history of representation. In *fall storm (california 2003)* for example, Battle shoots several electrical storms off of a television monitor and then reprocesses and collages the different pieces of the storms to create one apparently seamless storm that is entirely virtual. The electricity of the LCD is more palpable than the spectacular lightning display, which is overshadowed by the lines of the monitor. These projects mark the impossibility of separating nature from image, our understanding of the natural world from our capacity to imagine it.

History and the act of collective remembering are important aspects of many of Battle’s films. The process of imagining events that have long disappeared (like the buffalo) or that never were (Hollywood’s Wild West) is often dwelled upon through the very materiality of the filmic as a hand-made process—an act of fabricating rather than recording reality. In *hysteria* (2006), Battle selects a few images from a book on the Salem Witch Trials. She hand-processes and solarizes the simple but evocative line drawings of the trials. A dull drone on the sound track is sufficiently dramatic to underscore the emulsion lifts that come as one of the accused is sentenced to death. The last image in the film is a woman hanging. The filmic images are unstable and fragmented. They stand in for a history that is

so familiar as to be iconic, and yet inaccessible to us. The film is the most dramatic of all Battle's films—its intensity builds quickly, and its final image is strangely disturbing, even haunting. Battle animates the material to such an extent that it feels as though we are seeing photographs of actual events. That is her alchemy.

Janine Marchessault

QUESTIONS

1. How does Battle draw attention to the material qualities of film in her film-making? How is this different from conventional filmmaking?
2. "Handcrafts, with their relation to the body and the physical senses, counteract the drive toward technology and dematerialization in our culture" (Ullrich 126). Discuss the use of "handcraft" in Battle's films as a response to the development of technology and digital media. Does it create a more "visceral, physical cinema" (Mike Hoolboom)?
3. A number of Battle's films are made with "cameraless" techniques, such as photograms (placing objects directly on the film strip and exposing it to light) and painting and taping directly on the film. Discuss the use of these techniques in relationship to the concept of the index.*
4. Marchessault identifies "history and the act of collective remembering" as important aspects of many of Battle's films. What is the role of history in Battle's work? How does she use found footage?
5. Marchessault writes, of *the distance between here and there*: "The film is able to powerfully evoke that indefinite liminal nowhere, the feeling of being dislocated and in movement." Which other of Battle's films achieve this, and how?
6. In her essay "The Workmanship of Risk: The Re-Emergence of Handcraft in Postmodern Art," Polly Ullrich argues that "embracing handwork does not necessarily mean abandoning Conceptualism" (125) and that much recent art manages to synthesize handcraft and postmodernism. Does Battle's work achieve this synthesis? What aspects of her work could be considered "post-modern"?

* In the study of semiotics, an index is a sign whose characteristics are directly, physically determined by its object. A footprint is an example of an indexical sign. A photographic image is taken to have the characteristic of an index because it is at least partly determined by the appearance of a real object in the world. But the marks made by an artist, however abstract, can also be seen as indexical signs, signs whose characteristics are determined by the physical gestures of the artist's hand. (Think, for example, of the ways in which Jackson Pollock's "drip" paintings provide a clear record of the ways in which the paint was applied to the canvas.) For a discussion of the indexical status of direct animation, see Tess Takahashi's essay "Meticulously, Recklessly Worked Upon: Direct Animation, the Auratic and the Index," in *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema*, edited by Chris Gehman and Steve Reinke (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2005) (Gehman).

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Gehman, Chris. "Steven Woloshen: Animation on the Edge." *Spotlight Series: Steven Woloshen Study Guide*. Toronto: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 2007.

Ullrich, Polly. "The Workmanship of Risk: The Re-Emergence of Handcraft in Postmodern Art." *Landscape with Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman*. Eds. Karyn Sandlos & Mike Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press & Images Festival, 2001.

FILMOGRAPHY

Behind the Walls and Under the Stairs, 2006, 35mm, 3 min.

traveling thru with eyes closed tight (map #2 - january 03 thru january 06), 2006, 35mm, 4 min.

three hours, fifteen minutes before the hurricane struck, 2006, 35mm, silent, 5 min.

hysteria, 2006, 35mm, 4 min.

migration, 2005, 16mm, 5:30 min.

the distance between here and there, 2005, 16mm, 8 min.

map (august 1 to 10, 2003), 2005, 16mm, 3 min.

nostalgia (april 2001 to present), 2005, 16mm, 4 min.

following the line of the web, 2004, 16mm, silent, 2:30 min.

buffalo lifts, 2004, 16mm, silent, 3 min.

paradise falls, new mexico, 2004, 16mm, dual-projection, 4 min.

fall storm (california 2003), 2004, video, 3 min.

graffiti test #1, 2003, 16mm, 1 min.

oil wells: sturgeon road & 97th street, 2002, 16mm, 3 min.

Cooper/Bridges Fight, 2002, 16mm, 3 min.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

With a B.Sc. in Environmental Biology from the University of Alberta and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, Christina Battle currently lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Her work has been supported by grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT), the National Film Board of Canada, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Battle's films and installations have been exhibited internationally in festivals and galleries including: VideoEx Experimental Film & Video Festival (Zurich); The London Film Festival; The Images Festival (Toronto); The Toronto International Film Festival; The International Film Festival Rotterdam; White Box (New York); Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax, Canada); The City of Toronto's Nuit Blanche 2006; and the 2006 Whitney Biennial: "Day for Night" (New York). In January, 2006, LIFT presented a solo retrospective of Christina's work in their New Directions in Cinema Series, entitled "memories of moments from here and there."

For more information see www.cbattle.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janine Marchessault holds a Canada Research Chair in Art, Digital Media and Globalization in the Faculty of Fine Arts at York University. She is a past President of the Film Studies Association of Canada and a founding editor of the journal *Public: Art/Culture/Ideas*. She is the Director of the Visible City Project + Archive (www.visiblecity.ca), which is documenting new urban art forms. Her most recent books include *McLuhan: Cosmic Media* (Sage, 2005) and a co-edited collection *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema* (UTP, 2007).

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