

CHRISTINA BATTLE

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND: CHRISTINA BATTLE'S PIRATES

BY JON DAVIES

CHRISTINA BATTLE . BUFFALO LIFTS, 2004, 16MM FILM, 3 MINUTES.
NOSTALGIA (APRIL 2001 TO PRESENT), 2006, 16MM FILM, 3.5 MINUTES.

With her prolific and accomplished output, Christina Battle has established herself since 2002 as a key figure in Toronto's experimental film scene. Battle's work has always been marked by a particularly rigorous, thoughtful and considered use of DIY celluloid hand-processing techniques that sets her apart from the medium's dilettantes. Her studio practice includes not only hand-processing both black-and-white and colour film as both negatives and positives, in addition to employing solarization, optical printing and many other imaging techniques. Most affectingly, it is not only the tactile celluloid that is manipulated, but her ambitious themes — history, memory and ideology among them — that are «processed.» For

example, Battle's *nostalgia (april 2001 to present)* collages and fractures «kitsch» advertisements from the 1950s to reveal the tightly regimented roles and rules that formed the dark shadow behind every child's smile and warm apple pie. The soundtrack subtly crescendos throughout from a state of washed out, disintegrated cacophony into greater harmony, finally resolving into a rousing, affirmative melody only at the last instant as the image goes black. In this perfect white world, true joy and freedom are fragile and tenuous, haunted by spectres of political and cultural subjugation that cloak themselves in innocuous facades and comfortable stereotypes. Her masterful film *hysteria* instead crescendos

visually as the imagery — black and white drawings of the Salem witch trials — shudder and shake as the furor of scapegoating builds to its murderous conclusion. It is these jarring, jumpy frames that viscerally convey the progression from accusation — fingers pointed at the «guilty» — to annihilation.

In Battle's meta-Westerns *paradise falls, new mexico* and *Cooper/Bridges Fight*, American manifest destiny and the delirious violence of masculinity are put through the optical wringer. While the dual-screen *paradise falls* juxtaposes serene Western landscapes with the eventful, dramatic artifice of Hollywood, *Fight*, with its

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CHRISTINA BATTLE holds a B.Sc. in Environmental Biology from the University of Alberta and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. Battle's works have been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto (LIFT), the National Film Board of Canada, The Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council, and have screened internationally in festivals and galleries including: VideoEx Experimental Film & Video Festival (Zurich, Switzerland), The Antimatter Underground Film Festival (Victoria), The London Film Festival (London, England), The Images Festival (Toronto),

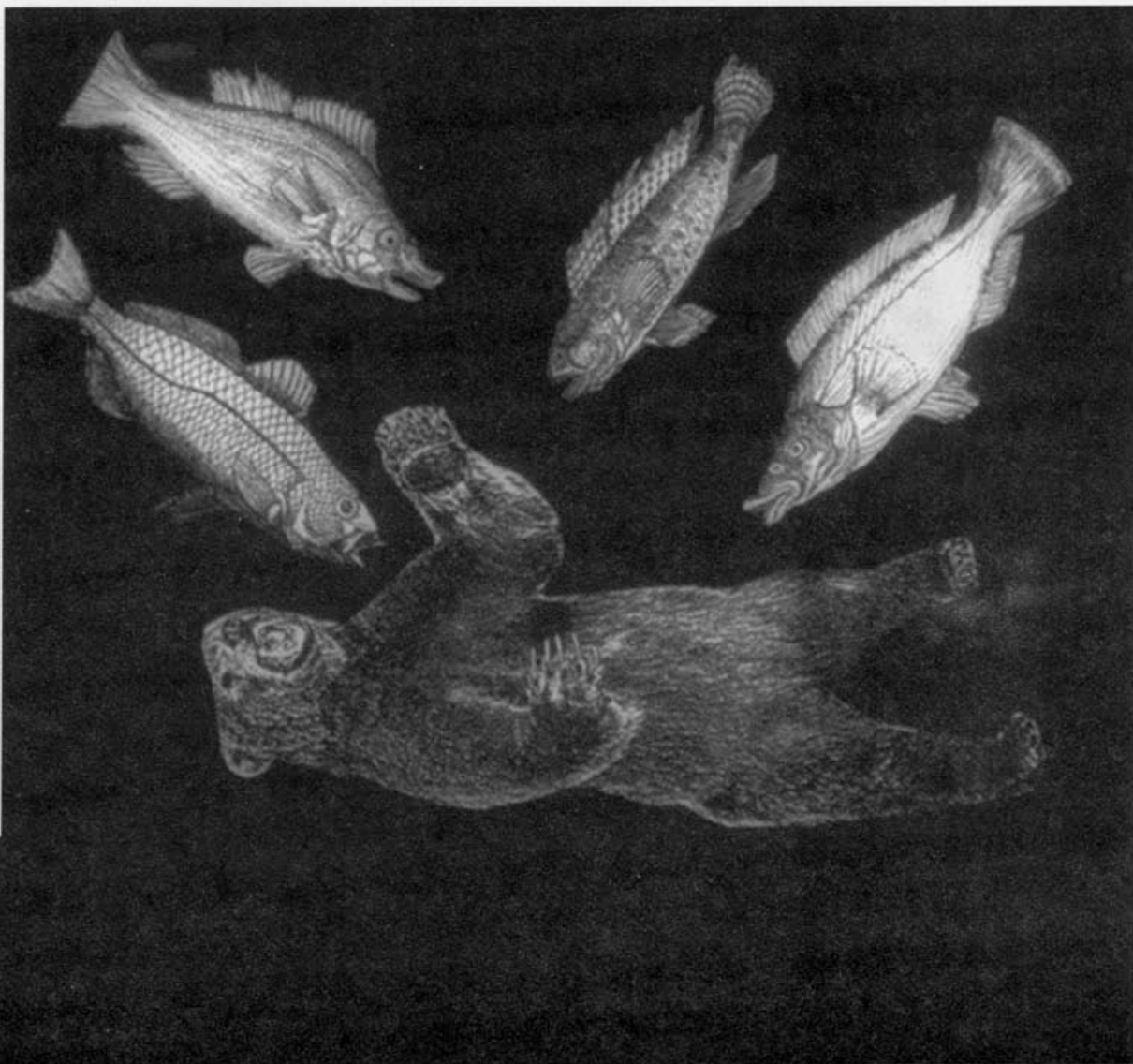
The Toronto International Film Festival, The International Film Festival Rotterdam (The Netherlands), White Box (New York), Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax), The Foreman Art Gallery at Bishops University (Sherbrooke), The city of Toronto's Nuit Blanche 2006 and in the 2006 Whitney Biennial *Day for Night* (New York). Battle lives and works in Toronto.

Notes:

1. This is not to dismiss the visual pleasures of her more abstract films, which do not traffic as heavily in historic references.

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CHRISTINA BATTLE _ HYSTERIA, 2006, 35MM FILM, 4 MINUTES.
THREE HOURS, FIFTEEN MINUTES BEFORE THE HURRICANE STRUCK, 2006, 35MM FILM, 5 MINUTES.



soundtrack of radio static, completely shatters the frame, abstracting the fight between Gary Cooper and Lloyd Bridges in *High Noon* into a frenzied, testosterone-dripping spectacle of male physicality. Meanwhile in *buffalo lifts* and *oil wells: sturgeon road & 97th street*, the Alberta-born artist defamiliarizes such clichéd Prairie iconography as buffalo and oil wells, examining how the land went from being bountifully stocked with the former to being ravaged and bled dry by the latter. The great beasts have a very tenuous grasp not only on the geographic land but the landscape of the emulsion too. They are literally in the process of disappearing into the film's shards and scratches. Echoing the buffalo herd's trampling, the oil wells pump with an equally sure rhythm, but their mechanical dance is much more foreboding for no matter how much Battle tries to slow them down in the editing room, they will hammer along until doomsday. All this suggests that we could go one further than the word «process» to describe Battle's relationship with her medium and her themes and call it «struggle» instead.¹

Recently, Battle has set out to chart new territory by bringing her work into the gallery space — a path many of her filmmaking compatriots have followed before her, notably fellow Torontonians Mike Hoolboom (who has written evocatively on Battle's films). This spatialization of her work from single or occasionally double-channel projection into mixed-media installations that include not only moving pictures but also objects and stills, pushes her exploration of the cinematic into unexpected forms. For *Uncharted Histories: Pirates*

at YYZ, Battle has crafted a suite of works that explore the mythos of pirates, those indispensable oceanic assailants who drifted in and out of occupying a quasi-sanctioned position during the great European imperial seafaring expeditions from about the 16th to the 18th centuries. Thematically, the piece fits neatly with *hysteria*, another example of a group of subversives whom the authorities — religious or monarchic — could both invest with all their darkest fantasies and exploit for their own purposes. Battle naturally draws subtle parallels between events and publics of hundreds of years ago and those of today. One of her most powerful images — the end point of *hysteria* and of *Uncharted Histories* — is that of the hanged man. This figure echoes through time as the ultimate symbol of authority — whether «legitimate» or «illegitimate» — staging an obscene spectacle to assert its power over public bodies, from the racist lynchings common in the American South to Saddam Hussein's execution on YouTube.

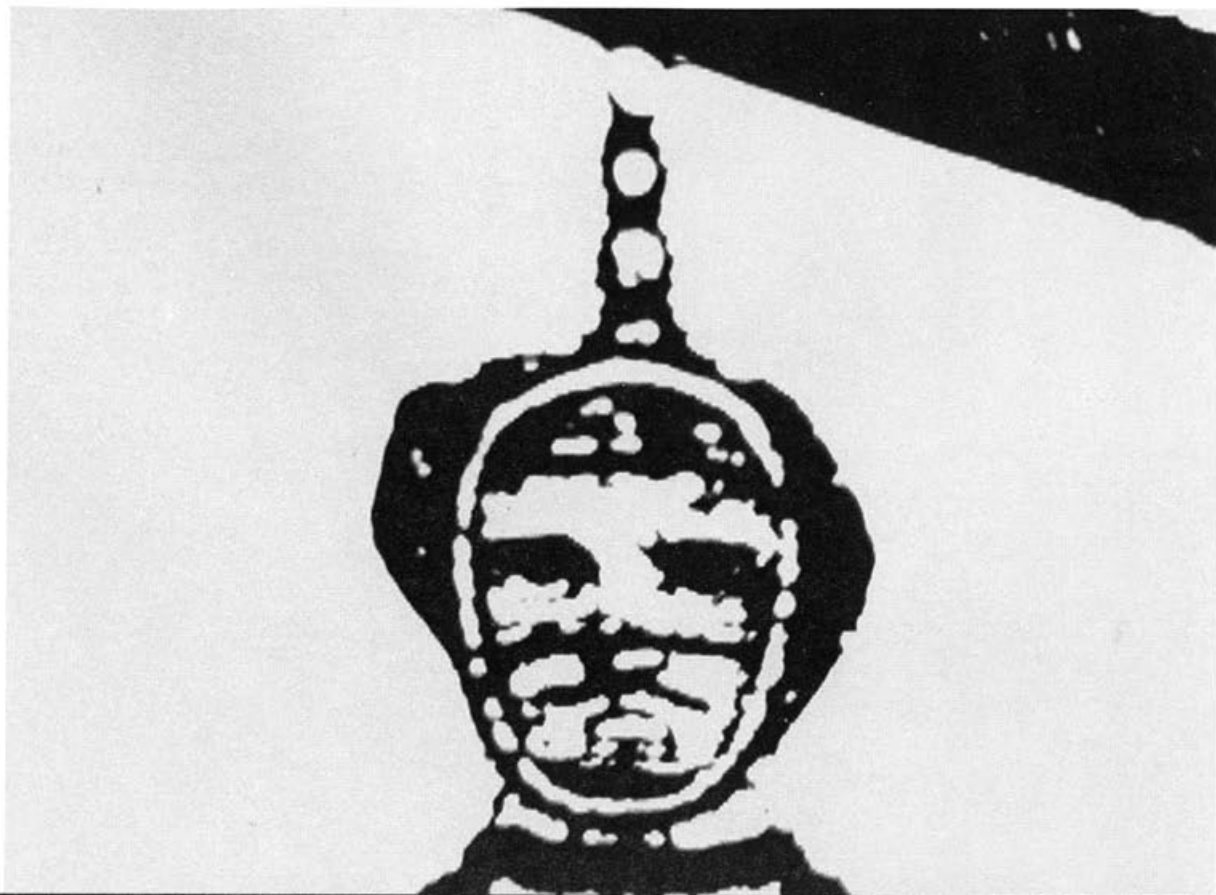
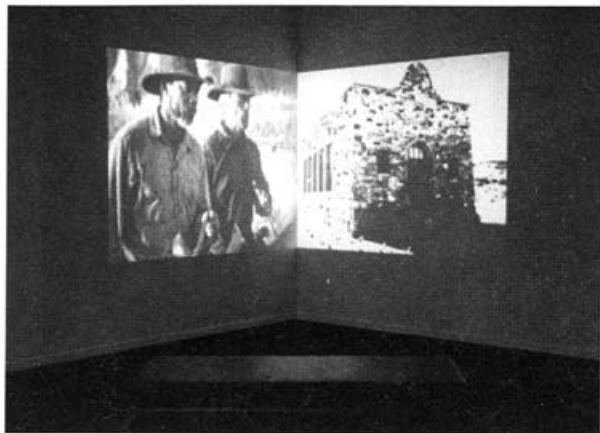
Battle's process in making *Uncharted Histories* deserves some elucidation. Within two wooden lightboxes are still images; they are not mere cut-and-paste appropriations but the end result of a lengthy process of cinematic alchemy. Battle began with extensive historical research, finding texts and images to incorporate into the project. She re-photographed individual images with a trusty 35mm movie camera set to expose single frames, developed the footage, and then boiled it in order to separate the image-carrying emulsion from the celluloid's base, and finally transferred these fragile images to clear plastic acetate to compose

the final image. She thus engages in a Byzantine cinematographic process to achieve a single collaged image as the end result. As textured and layered as her films, these collages are necessarily piecemeal due to the breaking down of the original image into 35mm rectangular fragments, all their edges are visible. Perhaps Battle's grandest elaboration of this technique is her recreation of the world in another component of the installation, piecing together a map of the globe atop a wooden desk, illuminated from below. In all these sculptural pieces, the still tableau, the single moment takes precedence, whether a rendering of the world to assist in its conquest or the imagined instants of pirates encountering strange new worlds that are illuminated by the lightboxes.

Battle's increased interest in the *still* image composed using *moving-picture* technology is also palpable in her sublime recent film ...*three hours, fifteen minutes before the hurricane struck*. Here concise, oblique statements by survivors of Hurricane Katrina — «the sky turned black,» «trees started falling» alternate with somber, gothic drawings of unlikely groupings of flora and fauna specimens. This movie is utterly static, as if frozen in a state of perpetual anticipation or perhaps catatonic from a past trauma — and it presents impossible dream images with its enigmatic text fragments rather than images of the hurricane ostensibly at the center of it all, the film's structuring absence.

Battle has acknowledged the inspiration of Joseph Cornell's «diorama-like boxes» on ...*before the*

CHRISTINA BATTLE . PARADISE FALLS, NEW MEXICO, 2004. DUAL PROJECTION 16MM FILM, 5 MINUTES, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE FOREMAN ART GALLERY.
UNCHARTED HISTORIES: PIRATES, 2008. MIXED MEDIA INSTALLATION.



hurricane struck, and *Uncharted Histories'* actual boxes reference the display conventions of the naturalist's collection, the cabinet of curiosities or the didactic museum display. In yet another case we find projected texts from *The World Encompassed*, the fanciful diary of Sir Francis Drake recounting his adventures with the fantastic, exotic flora and fauna that he discovered on his explorations — from plantains to fireflies to flying fish — as well as the fearsome storms and breathtaking topographies he witnessed. These excerpts form another parallel with ... *before the hurricane struck's* unlikely combinations of animals and vegetables of all manner of sizes (butterflies dwarfing goats, grasshoppers as plump as birds). Drake's descriptions — lyrical, dramatic, passionate, even florid — capture the huge impact on the psyche of encountering phenomena that are radically new; what goes unspoken is how his thoroughly spellbinding use of language and his infectious zeal consign to invisibility all those who have witnessed those sights before him. The collage lightboxes and their speculative narratives that envision pirate explorers taking their first step into uncharted territory, its novel qualities exaggerated and monstrous to their eyes, flank these texts.

The centerpiece of *Uncharted Histories* is a dual-channel video projection juxtaposing footage of familiar scenes and images of piracy — lapping ocean waves, towering sailing ships, billowing flags, cannon battles, all either presented «as is» or gently hand-processed — with texts relating the misadventures of several different pirates

such as Drake, John Hawkins and Henry Morgan. Battle's imagery is frequently iconic rather than specific — this is what makes the histories she excavates resonate so deeply with our present and here it is shaped by the extensive series of narrative vignettes detailing the treasure-hunting, slave-stealing, raping and pillaging committed by her storied anti-heroes. Living human bodies are largely absent from the clips — which emerge out of and then fade back into black giving the projection a ghostly aura, particularly as Captain Kidd ends up hanged and Blackbeard decapitated by story's end.

Ultimately Battle's exhibition casts the pirates in a liminal space. Their complex position within power's web connects them to the figures in her earlier work, who find themselves trapped between civilized and wild, law and desire. The pirates' deeds are described by words but the men are never fully brought to life by them; the lyrical images connote the heady myths of piracy while keeping the men themselves invisible. Similarly, the pirates are framed as innocents stumbling blindly into alien territory, manipulated —consciously and unconsciously— by their monarchical puppet masters, and also as mercenaries willing to commit the foulest crimes for the right price, advancing the colonial project all the while. Like the hanging man, they cannot speak, cannot assure us of their guilt or innocence, of which side they are on or who they really are.

