

Louisa Fairclough

Meet

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Sometimes it can be quite difficult for the work of artists and photographers dealing with specific social and political issues that can become easily polarized, to be assessed upon its merits alone, and for the judgments made by the viewers not to be confused by sentimental feelings towards the subjects that are presented to them. This is not so much the case when looking at for example, documentary photo-essays of a human or natural disaster, however, when the subject of the work is based on a particularly divisive issue, this can be problematic. This is not only the predicament of Louisa Fairclough's audience, but it was also perhaps a difficult question for her when making the project: "Where do I stand with this work". *Meet*, a four screen video installation explores and describes some of the moments within the drama of blood sports in Britain.

Meet stems from Fairclough's interest in the relationship between ownership and access to land across the countryside. This developed into a more specific investigation of foxhunting after Fairclough moved to a village where, like many villages across the country, hunting is an integral part of the culture. For her, the project was also an attempt to locate her own emotional position within the debate. The project, which was commissioned by Picture This, was completed over almost two years, which means that the footage was made both before and after the ban on hunting with dogs was introduced. Much of this time was taken up with Fairclough's negotiation with the hunt who, especially since the ban, are extremely suspicious of video cameras (as video is the only means of enforcement). Although Fairclough maintains that she still has a neutral attitude towards hunting, she was gradually accepted by the hunt and almost embraced, making it a little harder for her to maintain a comfortable critical distance.

The project does not concentrate solely upon hunting, but also shooting, the sound effects of which dominate the surround-sound installation. The experience of this work is quite unique. Four double-sided screens are delicately hung around the quite intimate space at Room, and snippets of digitized 16mm films are projected onto them. The viewer is therefore encouraged to move around the space and consider the work from a variety of angles, almost like a piece of sculpture. The soundtrack is mostly quite abstract, but it is interlaced with common motifs like horns and calls. Although it can be quite disorientating, it binds the scattered images well.

Fairclough is drawn to the traditions and rituals within these sports and her vignettes depict at times, quite clichéd imagery. Her decision to use 16mm film has given these scenes an almost timeless quality. It assumes a distinctly quaint aesthetic which is awkward considering the nature of subject: Is Fairclough trying to represent these sports as archaic and anachronistic, or is she treating them with nostalgic affection? Using film (as opposed to video) is, however, one of Fairclough's traits, and it is somewhat integral to how she manages her rushes. As part of a residency at the South Acton Estate in 2003, Fairclough made a series of what she describes as portraits, filmed on Super 8 and projected over the site of a demolished tower block. In this work, using a Steambeck editing table, much of Fairclough's vignettes are broken down, slowed, and sometimes stutter their way along. These techniques break down the footage from film clips into something different. They are not quite - as Fairclough describes them - a series of still photographs (although that is of course what any sequence of film is), but they are moments which have been suppressed, muted and are fighting from being stopped as abruptly as a still photograph.

During a gallery talk with Fairclough and anthropologist, Dr. Garry Marvin, matters concerning the aesthetics of hunting and other blood sports were discussed at length. Hunting in particular attracts much criticism for its customs and etiquette, things which are in fact irrelevant. Fairclough's images only scratch this surface, and to an extent endorse the stereotypical imagery of hunting and other country sports. However, since the ban has forced foxhunting into a charade of its former self, and only the aesthetics remain, perhaps this is an appropriate treatment of the issue.