

Big Pond Small Fish

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Bill Burns: *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Choir*

33 rpm record, Toronto: Big Pond Small Fish Productions, released 2012, and performed at the Tasmania Junction Arts Festival, Australia, September 6, 2013

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Canadian artist Bill Burns' recent opus "Dogs and Boats and Airplanes" represents a profound immersion in the iconography of travel and the sophisticated commercial industry which enables it. The project is both multi-sensorial in its focus on object interactions, and interdisciplinary in that it engages cinematic appropriation, quotidian social phenomena, and community participation. Comprised of drawings, a photographic series, a photo book, a postcard book, a collection of salt and pepper shakers, a vinyl album, a video and a print series, this heterogeneous body of work has been widely exhibited during various stages of development though it has yet to be presented together in its entirety. In effect, "Dogs and Boats and Airplanes" engages with animal and

mechanical interactions in the post-industrial world largely by way of tactile, relational, and sonic encounters. Burns' preoccupation with a central theme – in this case, dogs, boats, and airplanes – and diligent accumulation of images and objects pays homage to Dadaist strategies of incongruence and absurdity to question how seemingly unrelated elements cultivate new aesthetic vocabularies.

Burns' concern for material forms of expression finds an exciting balance in its auditory companion, the *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Choir* (2012) recorded on a limited-edition 33 rpm vinyl. Over 100 eight to twelve-year-old students from Lord Lansdowne and Howard Park public elementary schools in Toronto were gathered to form a choir directed by Alan Gasser, with Burns himself serving as artistic director. The *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Choir* has also been performed in a number of cities using different iterations of participants. This aspect of Burns' project involves a connection to celebrated Russian director Sergei Eisenstein's epic *Ivan the Terrible Part I* (1944) released in the Soviet Union. Side A of the album was devised as incidental music for Burns' photo book *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Told in the Form of Ivan the Terrible* (2011). For Burns, the connection between animal and child, as seen here, points to a shared "double agency" whereby child becomes animal by way of social deviancy:

Animals are deeply connected to us through property relations, agriculture and husbandry. Dogs, for instance, have traveled, over several millennia, the entire planet with us; they are part friend and advisor; part worker, part merchandise and part wolf [...]. They are interlocutors. Double agents. Their role is tied, now to race, now to class, now to nation and now to advanced industrialism. In modern industrial societies, children, who play important roles in several of my current projects, share many characteristics of this double agency. They are purity and innocence; they are drug addled; they are gun-toting. Like dogs and foreigners, they often stand in for the unknown. My boats, airplanes works are on the one hand an absurdity, a challenge to our assumptions about what are appropriate themes for art, and on the other hand, they are stand-ins for war, desire, global travel and industry. (Burns 2012)

For Burns, dialectical relationships are not only instrumental in stimulating aesthetic discourse; they also represent an underlying characteristic of the social order: the people and animals that often embody moral virtue can just as easily threaten it. As double agents, each move unpredictably from child, dog, boat, or airplane to outlaw, wolf, battleship, or drone, which questions the durability of modern communities and nations alike.

Side B diverges slightly from this motif by including children voicing the sounds of animals: dogs lapping milk, a tugboat in the fog,



Figure 1
Bill Burns, *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Choir* in the recording studio (2012). Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

a dog kennel, and an airplane cockpit, among several others. In the track “Creaking Sail Boat Session” various members of the children’s choir imitate the sound of boat hull, as it is pressed against by the wind and the sea, through of guttural and throaty resonances. Using whispers, blows, and whistles, the result is an elaborate, one-minute interval of dexterous manipulation reminiscent of exactly that, a creaking sail boat on the water caught in the wind, but its affective jolt is uncomfortable approaching unsettling for reasons of its perceptual closeness to death moans. The sonances reproduced by the students represent a clash between the animals of the natural world and the vehicles of industrial society. The sonic disharmony resulting when these worlds collide in the *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes Choir* reveals intractable tensions and questions the possibility of their lasting coexistence.

The photo book that accompanies Burns’ project is appropriated from Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible Part I* and introduces a tactile element to the otherwise visual spectacle of the film. The black-and-white photographs in the 192-page *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes as Told in the Form of Ivan the Terrible* were accumulated over a period of nine years, between 2002 and 2011,

and were taken in cities from Canada, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America. During the opening scene of Eisenstein's film, Ivan is coronated as Tsar of the people of Russia before stoutly announcing his militaristic intentions to friends and enemies of the state. The conceptual and aesthetic relationship between Burns' work and Eisenstein's film are both whimsical and compelling. Take, for example, chapter one of the book entitled "Ivan's Coronation." A small white dog with a ceremonial lei around its neck faces the camera while its tongue hangs lazily from its mouth. On the following pages are grainy, off-center images of large military cargo planes in flight and various naval, sailing, freight, and fishing boats on the water. Though Burns' photographs do not faithfully register Ivan's coronation according to Eisenstein's version, they reference the event through allegorical signifiers: the elaborate costumes worn by those witnessing the coronation. Ivan's own righteous dictations of power are cleverly echoed by Burns in photographs of a festooned dog, a naval ship, and military aircraft. The photographs can be misconstrued as cute, at times even adorable, nonetheless Burns' complex use of animal symbolism, appropriation, and sociocultural iconography form a rich aesthetic vocabulary and a biting political commentary. In the pictures of furry animals, floating boats, and flying airplanes lies a sharp condemnation of empire: military ships patrolling colonized land, commercial vessels supplying countries with cheaply-manufactured goods, and tankers shipping oil from "liberated" nations speak to disproportionate power relations, exploitation of labor, and the destruction of natural resources. For Burns, the photographs, and his own ability to snap them throughout the world via boats and airplanes, respond to a special moment in

Figure 2

Bill Burns, *Dogs and Boats and Airplanes as Told in the Form of Ivan the Terrible* (2011), page spread of "Coronation." Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



modernism and history: technological progress has facilitated access to and mobility in the world, which has changed the character of human perception. As David Harvey explains, “progress entails the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate ‘annihilation of space through time’” (1990: 205). Thus, Burns’ work questions the rewards of travelling through physical space using modern technology when doing so transforms our sensory experience and appreciation of the natural world.

Bill Burns’ subject matter has often involved animals as signifiers of sociopolitical ails, current ecological debates, and complex moral quandaries; indeed, “Dogs and Boats and Airplanes” is a departure from his well-known work “Safety Gear for Small Animals,” a fascinating collection of scale model protection equipment for various animals including birds, frogs, and squirrels. The “Dogs and Boats and Airplanes” project continues along this trajectory though for different ends. Burns’ use of heterogeneous materials, including found objects and audible components, form an abstract conceptual logic that is at once mystifying and gripping. For viewers, Burns offers materials and sensorial encounters intended to engage audiences through affective experience and critical understanding. His opus stands as a nuanced engagement with dimensionality, with the instruments and energies that influence our perception of art and the economies of sensation.

References

- Burns, Bill. 2012. “Bill Burns.” Available at: <http://www.orgallery.org/archive/2012> (accessed August 5, 2013).
- Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.