

Mike Hoolboom and The Invisible Man:

Gallery Review The Iconic Canadian Filmmaker's First-Ever Solo Public Gallery Show

Jon Davies

Mike Hoolboom's *The Invisible Man* at the Art Gallery of York University is a conceptually tight show that rewards multiple viewings and the patience of spectators who remain seated throughout the projections. The three Hoolboom pieces on display demand to be seen from beginning to end as they are nothing less than philosophical treatises on the twin worlds of reality and images, the image-world given the short-hand designation of The Movies.

During an evening dubbed "Mike Hoolboom: ALIVE" at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, Hoolboom conversed with Art Gallery of York University curator Philip Monk, screened a few of his recent short films and videos, and spoke in his severely mannered form of verbal diarrhea. Anyone familiar with Hoolboom's voice-over narrations – which often teeter precariously between insightful, illuminating observation and overly-pretentious earnestness – might find it noteworthy that his public speaking is equally idiosyncratic: It is a flurry of dramatic fits and starts, nervous introjections and florid theatricality. He is always performing, his "real" opinions, beliefs and insights couched in glazes of metaphor, dry wit, irony and confusion. All this to say that up there on stage, Hoolboom delivered a manifesto, a complaint on behalf of artists that he implored us all never to rectify, for ranting on this subject is the artist's life-blood. He launched into a clever, no-holds-barred deconstruction of the roles of "curator" and "programmer." With tongue pressed firmly in cheek, he effectively analyzed how film and video artists are exploited first by the gatekeepers

of theatrical exhibition and now, increasingly, by the guardians of the white cube.

The show *The Invisible Man* at the AGYU was Hoolboom's first solo public gallery show in a career lasting twenty-five years that has placed him in the pantheon of Canadian experimental film greats. *The Invisible Man* is a conceptually tight show that rewards multiple viewings and the patience of spectators who remain seated throughout the projections. The three Hoolboom pieces on display demand to be seen from beginning to end (which is of course possible, but not encouraged, by being looped) as they are nothing less than philosophical treatises on the twin worlds of reality and images, the image-world given the short-hand designation of The Movies.

In The Future, a short amuse-gueule in the gallery's entrance, is both a premonition of what is to come and of what now seems to be Hoolboom's primary interest: the impact of cinema on our psyches and life-worlds. This investigation can be found resonating throughout his work, which takes on other major themes such as the body, memory and history. In a few short minutes, it neatly sums up the questions posed by the show, and uses the evocative, careful juxtaposition of clips culled from narrative films and other sources and original footage to illustrate – either directly or obliquely – Hoolboom's elegiac text, which I will reprint in its entirety:

In the future
Each moment
Will be photographed

Doubled
 Our bodies will grow transparent
 We will enter each other
 Like walking through a door
 Until at last
 We come to the end
 Of the picture world
 A world
 Where we are also pictures
 Our movies and photographs
 Will they help us understand
 Our last place?
 Teach us
 How to die?

For Hoolboom, the movies are an immensely powerful and influential force in the way that we interpret our own lives and the very fibre of the world surrounding us. And no one is more attuned to the image-world than Hoolboom, who mock-solemnly describes in *Imitation Of Life* how he was a child engineered to have his entire body be an opening – an orifice to absorb the world’s representations – by his father, a mad scientist (this accompanies a scene of Rotwang’s lab from Lang’s *Metropolis*). To approach these work you have to be willing to accept a high degree of polemic: Hitler will be compared to a movie star, our society will be dubbed “the children of Fritz Lang and Microsoft,” life and death will be writ large on the silver screen. For Hoolboom, a Person with AIDS, the stakes are immensely high: in a talk at the Art Gallery of Windsor he claimed that the reason so many people are dying of AIDS right now is that they are not part of The Movie, they are left out of the realm of representation and consequently might as well not exist. These films can be read as eulogies, and with Hoolboom’s romantic temperament, they have a much more lyrical beauty, visual grace and – dare I say it: poetry – than one finds in most other works of essayistic media deconstruction.

In the sublime *Imitation Of Life* – a rich title if there ever was one – Hoolboom’s voice-over, spoken here in at least three voices, is subordinated to the narrating role of the written text, which also carries the argument of *In The Future*. (Both of these are parts of the feature length anthology *Imitations Of Life* from 2003.)

Imitation Of Life begins with a literal representation of the title, a montage of images of human conception, the beginning of a human life mediated through cinematography. These shots herald a haunting evocation of a wide range of compelling – if not exactly fresh – ideas about the cinema and the image-world in

general and their effects on consciousness: that the cinema – especially Hollywood – is doing the work that dreams once served; that any imagining of the future from the “species” of film called science-fiction is more accurately a representation of our contemporary society (and that recognizing our already existing dystopia will always be postponed to the future); how we are always engineering a world based on our images of the selves we like to consume and consequently become. Hoolboom suggests that the movies are trapped in an endless cycle, doomed to repeat the same stories over and over again, mourning but never learning, masking the “endless cruelty” that we are capable of meting out on real bodies. This world of fantasies, of lost possibilities and imagined but impossible outcomes, is the only thing that stands between us and “our desire to destroy everything.” We can infer that Hoolboom’s work is not necessarily an attempt at new stories – his work stays in the domain of recognizable, even conventional forms – but to provide a space of reflection and meditation in the gaps between the images, in their reconstruction in different “fringe” narratives. This is weighty stuff, and the dream-like piece is accompanied by a suitably droning, haunting soundtrack.

The eponymous video installation in the central chamber of the gallery, made especially for this exhibition, begins with a humorous, Dorian Gray-esque conceit that results in a quintessentially Hoolboom double-take. His own, adult male voice claims that we was born an old man and went through life losing wrinkles, getting younger, devolving. Hoolboom is in a curious kind of dialogue with a younger man who claims to be Hoolboom’s “writer,” repeatedly emphasizing that he wrote the script of Hoolboom’s life, that he controls his actions. This writer is the creator of the cinema, the image world. Here the movies are a superficially benevolent but ultimately violently prescriptive medium that initiates us into the world: teaching language, teaching vision, teaching values. We are all born into a script that has already been written for us, and our agency is largely illusory. This piece has more original footage than the others, with time-lapse images of the passing of light in interiors and the shifting of tide water in a harbour. Through these images of light and flow Hoolboom sought to craft a “birth to and as film.” The logical end point for this figure born old and getting younger each year is to become invisible, to merge completely with the image world, losing identity within the “ocean of personalities” on offer, and so we are given a montage of scenes from different invisible man films. Through what superficially appear to be kitschy special effects and the low genre of the monster movie, Hoolboom

is able to express the total dissolution of spectator/citizen – or is it artist? – into the media to the point that subjectivity is completely wiped out. We all move further and further from awareness, the violence of the image world eroding the awareness and sensitivities we had at birth, represented by Hoolboom as an elderly, weathered figure losing their understanding of the real world as they go through a life scripted by another, the act of “forgetting mistaken for happiness.” The most startling moment comes from the seamless insertion of an invisible man’s footprints in the snow into some iconic shots of Kane’s childhood home in winter from Welles’s *Citizen Kane*. Overall, however, this piece lacks the same power of the other projections, which could be due to its slightly lazy over-reliance on clips of young 1950’s British lad Bud from Terence Davies’s *The Long Day Closes*, itself a transcendent masterpiece of movies-as-life.

Facing this projection is a silent techno-monolith: three monitors depicting, from top to bottom, a series of leisurely strolling people captured against the background of a luminous blue sky, superimposed images of underwater footage (a motif in *The Invisible Man*), medical and science footage (which mirrors the opening shots in *Imitation Of Life*) and others, and, at the bottom, a construction crew at night working on train tracks, illuminated only by the sparks of their equipment and some car headlights against a pitch black sky.

This is perhaps the least successful aspect of the exhibit as textless, voiceless sculptural installation is not really Hoolboom’s forte, not to say that he succeeds more with language than with images, but that this monolith seems to insist on a level of importance and meaning that its content does not adequately deliver. It does not contribute nearly as much as the films do, and seems like a concession to the idea of doing something specifically for a gallery setting, when in reality, the works on display would communicate just as effectively in a theatre.

For more information on Hoolboom and access to streaming video of selected works, visit the The Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art.

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