

Moving pictures

Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* from 1717 is one of the most famous painted journeys there is. Indeed, it's not just one of the most famous but arguably two of them, since Watteau created a second version around 1718. Ever since, the two versions of the *Pilgrimage* have beguiled and perplexed viewers. With their soft light, elusive emotions and travelling parties of aristocratic lovers apparently headed for an enchanted island, they are paintings that can seem very far indeed from the art of the early 21st century. But in his new work, *The lament* 2010–11, Arlo Mountford uses unlikely technology (digital animation) to undertake an unlikely journey. He finds his way back into Watteau's world, and nudges it into motion.

The two *Pilgrimages* reside today at the Louvre in Paris and Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin, but Mountford first came across them as a student in Perth when, like countless students before and since, he had to give a seminar on these famously hard-to-pin-down works. The seminar was nothing special, Mountford recalls, but the works made an impression on him. In 2010 he returned to the paintings, not as a student but as an artist, and began exploring them in an unusually close and ardent manner. Like a digital-age incarnation of the painters who can still be seen occasionally making copies in European museums, Mountford used a digital drawing tablet and a basic animation program to make his own works 'after' Watteau. Closer to hand-painted, cell-by-cell animation than the seamless perfection of contemporary computer-generated imagery, the two video projections created by Mountford have an unrushed, picture-book simplicity: water laps, rococo foliage shimmers and the lovers slowly make their way.

The result is the latest addition to Mountford's evolving gallery of 'moving pictures'. Like *The folly* 2009 and *The triumph* 2010, his animated homages to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Mountford's new video encourages one of the most 'childlike' yet probing fantasies one can have about a painted space. How would it feel to step across the threshold of the painting and into Watteau's world? How would the light fall, how would people move? And what might we see beyond the frame, in the moments before and after the stilled moment of the painting? That question is especially alluring in Watteau's case because of the famous 'puzzle' at the heart of his pilgrimage. Though the translated title of the 1717 work describes it as a pilgrimage to Cythera, the mythical island of love, writers and viewers have long debated which way the lovers are travelling. Are they heading towards the island, or looking back on it? Is the painting light and excited, or sad?

A simple answer is that it is both; Watteau has created a world where both possibilities are kept alive. In paying homage to Watteau, Mountford also claims the right to have it both ways – on contemporary terms. Not only does he bring his two projected versions of the pilgrimage together on one dark-green wall, as if they were two panels of a diptych in a late-19th-century museum, he also flips the second and later pilgrimage, on the right-hand side, so that it appears in reverse. For almost anyone who has studied Watteau in a formal setting, this double-barrel presentation will call to mind the standard format of western art historical education – two slides projected onto a lecture theatre's screen for purposes of comparison and contrast. Meanwhile, the reversed image brings to mind what Robert Storr calls the 'comedy of manners' surrounding such slide presentations, 'the frequent confusion about which side is front and which side is back'.¹

In Mountford's idiosyncratic 'slide show', this confusion proves to be highly productive – a case of something historically wrong feeling poetically right. By flipping the right-hand painting, Mountford turns the two grassy slopes into part of one continuous landscape. What he makes, in effect, is a strange new island or double Cythera, a fictional place that is built from paintings which themselves portray a fictional place. The loveliest moment in the completed work occurs when the lovers, having arrived by boat and made their way up one side of the island, simply step through the gap between the two paintings and re-emerge on the other side. From there they depart and return, and depart again, like figures circling in a shadow theatre, moving endlessly between lightness and sadness.

For viewers living a long way from Europe, the big problem with paintings such as Watteau's is that so many of them are somewhere else. Reproductions are all very well, but there is no substitute for the real thing – that's commandment number 1 in any rule book of looking. But Mountford's *The lament* also reminds me of a kind of exception to this rule. In the right circumstances, distance can foster an especially intense kind of connection with a painting, a brand of art-love that is as much about anticipating and wondering as it is about the rigours of first-hand experience. Poring over a reproduction in a book or staring up at a projected slide, we can sometimes have a painting to ourselves – enter it, lose ourselves in it, wonder about it – in a way that might not be possible in the crowded halls of a museum such as the Louvre. In his wonderful book about Watteau, *Antoine's alphabet*, Jed Perl relates a childhood memory of seeing a Watteau-like painting and becoming 'mesmerized by painting's dreams – and by all the dreamworlds and real worlds that painting could reveal'.² In Mountford's dream of Watteau's paintings, art history is not a room full of masterpieces bolted permanently to the walls, but a landscape full of loops, echoes, odd sidetracks and secret prospects.

Notes

- 1 Robert Storr, 'Next slide, please ...', in Darsie Alexander (ed), *Slide show: projected images in contemporary art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania 2005, p 51
- 2 Jed Perl, *Antoine's alphabet: Watteau and his world*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 2008, p 20

opposite and following pages:
The lament 2010–11, production stills from digital animation