

## James Richards

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James Richards, *Radio at Night*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Mark Blower.

James Richards's wall-size film-and-audio work *Radio at Night*, 2015, shows faces and figures whose identities remain unknown: a pair of staring eyes in a close-up clip from a vintage science film about a nervous condition that makes the eyes rapidly twitch; a trio of surgically masked doctors beneath the glare of operating-room lamps; a group of happy revelers emerging from a masked ball. The many animals we see are similarly anonymous—never beloved, named pets, but rather a flock of birds flying in random formation over a rippling sea, a row of freshly slaughtered pigs hanging bloodlessly in an abattoir, or a heap of factory-farmed fish being processed on a conveyor belt.

Richards directs our attention not to the singularity of an individual life but to faceless collectivities. His carefully selected images are mostly culled from his vast archive of found footage, ranging from science documentaries to online home movies, French erotica, newscasts, and more. Projected floor to ceiling, these giant clips flow smoothly from left to right across the screen in evenly spaced vertical bands —“pumped out,” as the artist describes it—like a kind of machine-generated visual writing.

This gently rolling, moving-image collage points toward the inexhaustible supply of source material produced by armies of unseen, anonymous filmmakers. The work's disjointed pictures are unexpectedly united by an atmospheric sound track that combines a female vocal ensemble with found noises, all in the key of C minor. With its strange lullaby and aesthetically pleasing, mostly black-and-white images installed in a sleep-inducing carpeted room, the soothing *Radio at Night* contrasts vividly with the exhibition's discomforting sound piece, *Crumb Mahogany*, 2016—a jarring title that seems randomly generated from a website like bandnamemaker.com. This stark, imageless installation was set in a large, brightly lit gallery, empty save for six standing audio speakers blaring toward two rows of hard gray benches that forced visitors to look at the stranger sitting across from them while listening to unrelated, if recognizable, sounds: a gong; ocean waves; whistling; throbbing electronic dance beats; suspenseful, cinematic strings; breaking glass; whispering; a typewriter clacking; a gunshot. *Crumb Mahogany's* overexposed space and assortment of mostly familiar noises seemed a rude antidote to the pacifying, nameless delights of *Radio at Night's* black box.

In the final work in the show, *Rushes Minotaur*, 2016, tall rectangular light projections showed a changing array of abstract black-and-white images—mostly close-ups of human skin—that slowly roll over each screen like slides under an immense microscope. Like his earlier *Rosebud*, 2013, Richards's digital video collages hint at some hidden logic—such as the riddle that explains Charles Foster Kane's compulsions. For example, we note the artist's recurring fascination with geometric patterns in juxtaposition with entropic formlessness. Clouds of billowing smoke spread before an orderly architectural facade in *Radio at Night*, and the sounds in *Crumb Mahogany* briefly group together thematically (an ambulance siren, a car horn, screeching brakes) without adding up to narrative order.

At one sudden moment during *Radio at Night*, we see an unexpected, color-tinted 1970s-style love scene between two figures beneath a semitransparent sheet. Again, they are unrecognizable, but the image is romantically lovely—like veiled brides connecting in erotic play, or a soft-porn depiction of a genderless Adam and Eve in their bedroom Eden. In the Book of Genesis, God gave Adam the power to name all Earth's creatures before finding a companion for him; in Richards's videos, we have no power to name anything. Sounds and images wash over us, and we are straddled between pleasure and powerlessness—a sensation that increasingly describes the uneasy yet seductive life of our digital age.

—Gilda Williams