

REVIEWS:

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## Rodney Graham *Through the Forest*

Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel  
13 June – 26 September

In his vertiginous, nearly 40-year career, Rodney Graham has inhabited a motley crew of personae: Romantic poet (*Reading Machine for Lenz*, 1983–93), unconscious pirate (*Vexation Island*, 1997), student of modernist painting (*Picasso, My Master*, 2005) and self-serious, 1960s-era musician/artist (*Lobbing Potatoes at a Gong*, 1969, 2006), not to mention rock guitarist, pop songwriter and conceptual artist. But the Canadian artist has embodied no character more, perhaps, than the studious slacker – a mirror of what he has called, cheekily, 'the gifted amateur', a West Coast autodidact and regular genius-in-residence. That both slacker and bookworm are poses is easily assumed by the viewer; less easy to understand is the bountiful borderland where the two characters meet and blur, and from which Graham's restive works seem to spring, whole-bodied and inexplicable.

This hinterland – where European high culture, irreverent pop lyricism and the majestic natural world and its attendant technology meet – can be beautifully observed in this expansive, 100-work survey. Befitting

Graham's interest in alarming layers of associations, the exhibition's title could allude to the nighttime Polaroids and installations that Graham has made in the woods outside Vancouver. In fact, it is gleaned from an English translation of Georg Büchner's *Lenz* (1835), in which – in the layout of the book Graham picked up – the titular phrase appears twice in the same place at the end of a page. From this typographic peculiarity, Graham created a 'reading machine' that looped the said five pages. The resulting work, with its literary foundation, filmic aspect and strange, elliptical charge, acts as a kind of looking glass for the larger show – and Graham's oeuvre.

If the aforementioned work appears at the show's outset, this seems right: the artist's sensibility is distinctly literary. Along with Büchner, Antonin Artaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Edgar Allan Poe and Raymond Roussel have long inspired Graham (his debt to the late-nineteenth-century French poets, with their literary games, refrains and inspired layouts, is clear). Idiosyncratically, however, what Graham mines books for is their visual value: design, typography, heft, allusiveness. Simultaneously, he mines visual art for its narrative possibilities or sheer decorousness. Thus, for example, Donald Judd's austere 'stacks' become bookcases to hold Freud's collected works. Yet such beguiling works are not the show's focus: films are. See then the first floor's centrepiece: a small room featuring Graham's 1996 film of cinnamon sprinkled on a hot stove-burner, the granules flaring in the dark like constellations of stars.

Elsewhere, to the clicking of old projectors, a 1930s-era German typewriter is sprinkled with flour, which settles over the keys like snow, muting language's potentiality; crystal chandeliers rotate eerily against darkness; and Graham throws potatoes portentously at a gong. Nearby, the artist's colour lightboxes reveal the artist in disparate costume dramas: a Morris Louis wannabe, painting in his silk pyjamas; a fallen nineteenth-century French soldier, relaxing against panelled wood. The final floor features recent paintings: slight modernist simulacra, easily discarded. Not so with the last installation, a multipart work on Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) that conflates Graham's interest in sound, seriality, Minimalism, Romanticism, typography, decor. For *Parsifal* (1990/2009), Graham inserted an extraneous musical phrase into the opera; accompanying the music is an elegant poster, which pictures the artist in a sombre, Glenn Gould-like headshot, and the 12 bound volumes of the musical score in a beautiful glass case. Graham has called it a 'joke of cosmic proportions'. Like his best works, *Parsifal* both sets the mind running, associatively, and induces a kind of meditative trance. Its effect is at once ridiculous, gorgeous, scandalous and insistently perverse. *Quinn Latimer*