

SHARON LOCKHART, ETHNOGRAPHY HOME

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The image, shot using a fixed camera, lasts for ten minutes. It shows a boy sitting cross-legged in the middle of a forest. He is dressed in camouflage and a black hat. In his hands he holds a rifle. We suppose him to be keeping watch, but he does not seem to be waiting for anything or anyone: he is neither alert nor expectant. The landscape shows it to be autumn. Suddenly, though without disturbing the stillness of the image, the boy starts to play with a few twigs picked up off the ground; he looks distractedly down and seems bored, though not anxious. For just a few brief moments, he seems to remember that his job is to be a look-out or a hunter, which is why he has a rifle that he keeps hold of. But he does nothing: he seems to have nothing to do other than simply to be there.

This is one of the segments of Sharon Lockhart's film *Pine Flat*. When presented in a cinema, it is divided into two parts, each consisting of six ten-minute sections separated by a ten-minute intermission, which features the sound of a song sung by a boy; the first part portrays children on their own, and the second part portrays children playing in groups. When presented as a gallery installation, the two parts are shown in two respective screening rooms, one section of each part shown per day on a continuous loop. The installation at sala rekalde also includes a series of studio portraits of the children, who are from the area around Pine Flat, a town in rural California, where Lockhart chose to work over a lengthy period of time.

The elusive nature of the images and the structure of *Pine Flat* are reminiscent of other work by Lockhart and are perhaps the most distinctive traits of her work. It could be said that this elusiveness comes from the artist's determination to achieve a cognitive immersion in a particular community by making carefully worked and choreographed images. The body of images that comprises *Pine Flat* is presented to the viewer as a foreshortened, and not mannered, perspective of a culture, a group, that never quite reveals or describes itself in full.

I was looking for a place to get away and almost accidentally happened upon the town. During my month of living there alone, I came to know the children because I was one of the few adults outside during the middle of the day. I was always out walking, and they would see me and would trail alongside of me, inviting me to play or wanting to show me the creek, a tree, or their dog. I took my experiences there back to Los Angeles, and after some time I had the idea to make a film with the children of the town as its main subject. From there, unlike most of my other projects, the process was very organic and developed over nearly three years. I think my initial ideas about the children and the landscape changed significantly as I got to know more about them and the place they lived. I spent a lot of time scouting locations and discovered places that even some of the locals didn't know. For instance, on several occasions I screened work-prints, and the parents would often remark how beautiful a place was and would ask about it, amazed they had never seen it before like that, and offer other locations they thought would be good in the film.

A fundamental element of the strangeness of Lockhart's work resides in her use of the logic of fieldwork or ethnographic documentaries, a logic interspersed with omissions, distancing, and theatrical formalisation that in principle runs

counter to the premises of documentary. Thus, when faced with the final work, the viewer can find no sign that would provide concrete information on the subject of the study. In *Pine Flat*, it is only possible to grasp certain particular characteristics, the particular relationship children have with their bodies, but this does not constitute 'information' in the strict sense. So, one could say that Lockhart is moved by an ethnographic curiosity (in her works made in Japan, Brazil, and even in her own country), but that her projects do not aspire to knowledge so much as point to their own transformation into an experiment in exchanges between the artist and the community. The images are imbued with an affection that can only come from sharing, which we know little about. The knowledge of the other is more an impulse than an end. The story is that of an affectionate and aesthetic encounter that grows and is renewed when the spectator comes face to face with the image in the exhibition room. In *Pine Flat*, filmed in what is supposedly the artist's own culture, the operation becomes even more complex.

I really wanted this project to be in America. I never saw it as even going out of town, even though it is four hours from where I live. In the earlier projects, it was very difficult working in a foreign culture. There were language issues, but also cultural issues that provided positive elements, but also a lot of problems. By the time I got to Pine Flat, I was interested in simplifying the way I worked, but I also wanted to bring my ideas about ethnography home. Many of the problems I had with anthropology and ethnographic film revolved around Eurocentric models applied to non-Western cultures. For this project, I wanted to look at something that felt very familiar to me. I immediately felt connected to the landscape and the people of Pine Flat. It is very similar to the places I grew up.

In the photographic part of the project, I was inspired by photographs I'd seen from the turn of the century. Portrait photographers opened studios in rural towns and cities, and people would come to have their pictures taken. I was always interested by these kinds of pictures. I remember some from my youth, and I have collected them from places that I've travelled. In many ways, this seemed to me the antithesis of the ethnographic photographer. These local photographers provided a self-image to the town and a place for interaction. For the Pine Flat Portrait Studio series, I opened a portrait studio in hopes of developing something between the two: ethnography and portraiture. I don't think I could have engaged this distinction if I hadn't started with something I was a part of.

Another important aspect of the film is the camera's distance from the scenes portrayed. Despite the cultural and affectionate exchange discussed earlier, the images in *Pine Flat* do not convey a sense of intimacy, but bring us to a halt before them as an outside observer who has penetrated more than is proper into the lives of others. Both the curiosity and the familiarity of the artist's gaze are controlled by the specific nature of this distance: not so near and not so far, not quite a portrait and not quite a landscape. In the film, for example, it is extremely difficult to understand scraps of the conversations between the children, forcing the viewer to draw closer to or to concentrate even harder on the image in order to perceive more, to glean as much as possible from the image.

Each shot presented its own unique challenges and opportunities relating to how I used the camera. In some, I wanted the figures to move through the frame, and in others they were contained within the frame. I wanted viewers to be aware of the landscape and to consider both the kids and the landscape they are in when watching the shot.

I also spent a lot of time thinking about the sound in relation to what the camera was framing. I wanted viewers to hear certain things and not others. I felt

the ambient sound was interesting in how it described what was off camera. For instance, in the segment with the boy sleeping, I wanted to bring the camera fairly close to create a tension between what you were looking at and what you couldn't see. On the most basic level, the fact that the child's eyes are closed immediately puts his perceptual field off limits. At the same time, the sounds in the distance are somewhat foreboding, and you feel a sense of anxiety at his vulnerability.

In the second half of the film with the group shots, the camera is much farther away, and the voices of the children are recorded from a distance. By doing this, many of the shots become about the way the kids relate through body language and less about narrative language. The shot with the swing is a good example.

Every idea about the community is dashed or interrupted by the importance of the natural landscape—or rather, the staging of the relationship between the subjects and the surroundings. This emphasis connects these works with certain pictorial traditions and with a notion of nature as a utopian realm associated with the American tradition of Romanticism through transcendentalism. For the transcendental philosophers and poets of the 19th century, nature, in its ability to make the godhead present in every detail, was able to remedy any misfortune. Even without an explicit religious resonance, this philosophy has re-emerged at various times in the social history of America, including the hippy and New Age movements. A paradigmatic example of the cult of the natural is to be found in Robert Pirsig's famous book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, when he talks about country folk: "The hereness and nowness of things is something they know all about. It's the others, the ones who moved to the cities years ago and their lost offspring, who have all but forgotten it". This tradition is embodied in *Pine Flat* in the presentation of an unspoiled, autonomous landscape that is a veritable paradise and in the presence of subjects immersed in the here and now. At the same time, this is a vision that seems disjointed: the scenes come to a close, revealing a lack of accommodation between modernity and nature.

The appearance of the hunter or the children's game involving guns are emblems of a possible corruption of nature that is no longer idyllic. There is, however, a tension that is even more of a decisive factor than that offered by the theme. This tension comes from how Lockhart places her subjects in the scene. The hunter, for example, seems to be completely unaware of his surroundings. Whereas a viewer brought up in the city would see this place as a landscape and hence worthy of producing an aesthetic impact on the individual, the child demonstrates a complete indifference to his environs, given that he sees them every day. In this respect, Lockhart's films are a contemporary cinematographic take on the notion of "absorption" that Michael Fried studied in 18th-century French painting: a way in which the subjects are engrossed in their activities or inner world and manifest a complete lack of awareness of their surroundings or the viewer. Lockhart's film, in which the subjects play, heedless of the presence of the camera, prompts us to ponder the total adaptation of people to their environment and to the arrested, nonproductive time of childhood and rural life. Even so, Lockhart also pushes the image in another direction: in the composition of these scenes, there is a epochal gap between the surroundings and the subjects, a disassociation between the construction of the images—the continual references to the history of painting and to the arrested temporality of rural life—and the present era represented by the children and their unmistakably current language and fashions. These two effects (the subjects' unawareness of the particular character of their surroundings and the sense of historical lack of adaptation between the subjects and their environment) manage to detach the children from the landscape, which briefly seems to be a theatre backdrop against which the subject is set. There is a revelation here that is fundamental to the expressiveness of the

film: the more natural a subject is with respect to his surroundings, the greater the appearance of artificiality.

I wanted time enough for the viewer to get past their initial perception of whatever they were watching. Then, when I started thinking about the activities of the children, I realised that the issue of time was implicit in the tasks I was choosing for them. For the most part, I chose activities that were in-between moments: when they were waiting for something or looking for something or travelling somewhere. For instance, hunting is mostly a game of waiting. The hunter sits and waits, amusing himself as time passes. I saw a child's perception of time as different from ours, in that they spend most of their lives in these kinds of moments. They often get lost in whatever they are doing.

To what extent do we find looking at the images in this film to be exasperating? The exasperation is, in my view, engendered not so much by the circularity or the indeterminacy of subjects' actions, as by the descriptive rigour of the camera. In the images of children on their own, as well as in those of children in groups, Lockhart's somewhat distant, static, and insistent camera forces us to observe the slightest of transformations (for example, the child musician momentarily interrupting his playing to wash his harmonica off in the river, or the rain that takes the children playing in *Guns* by surprise) as if they were events, and to see inaction as what the American poet A.R. Ammons, in reference to nature, calls "a constant change". In *Pine Flat*, Lockhart offers us the American landscape, pastoral America, our own difficulty to see in a different era.