

Andrew Cross & Carl Palmer

Ikon Eastside Birmingham July 1 to 25

The Solo, 2010 a film collaboration between Andrew Cross and Carl Palmer – the drummer from the rock group Emerson, Lake and Palmer – transforms an unassuming landscape into the spatial re-enactment of music as pop idyll.

Previous photographic work by Andrew Cross includes rolling chalk downs and banal truck-stops that trace English and American landscapes that are both bucolic and post-industrial.

This exhibition is introduced by a wall of photographs, taken from dawn to dusk, of the site of the Knebworth 1970 pop festival. Blue sky with a backdrop of woods: the field undulates forming a dip, presumably the location of a stage. This landscape today is empty, yet something occurred here, recalling Eric Mottram's essay, 'Dionysus in America', in which he describes the electric, rock and roll, orgiastic frenzy, that gives a site such as this its enigmatic and mythic presence.

The exhibition starts in total darkness. The film begins with an image of Palmer, full figure, playing a single drum. On an

adjacent, large-scale screen, a close-up of the detailed drumming and footwork can be seen. Four speakers, one in each corner, periodically emit percussion sounds, making musical patterns that traverse the room. The spatial effect of sound is experienced as a powerful and physical environment surrounding the viewer. Yet at times this feels staged and synthetic. Characteristic of Cross's work, the build up of intense expectation is followed by a feeling of absence. This is particularly noticeable when the percussion is halted with abrupt silences.

Five drum pieces have been collaboratively developed and filmed from various viewpoints. The piece titled *Brushes*, for example, is filmed in bird's-eye view. *Ostinato* shows only Palmer's torso and feet as military-style drumming evokes the space of Kieferesque landscape. Cross describes this musical piece as emotionally close to the landscape where he grew up: Salisbury plain with its military tanks and heavy military presence. *Cymbals*, consists of a shot of the shiny brass undersides of ringing cymbals. Visually they form a continuous horizontal streak reminiscent of Turner's golden sunsets. Again, Palmer's head is edited from view.

The image of Palmer drumming at full tilt is neither quixotic nor absurd. A paradoxical image that is apparently straightforward, its complexity can be alluded to by the term, 'post-human, techno-

sublime'. The pop drumming is machine-like and honed as a consumer product, though in this film it is also crafted, and the sense of infinity associated with sublime nature has been supplanted into infinite technological space. In addition to this sublime musical space, the collaboration has identified an artistic space that is important. The play-off between popular culture and serious art has produced a parody of current artistic vanities. Celebrity culture coupled with technical virtuosity as showmanship, plus the signing of autographs, have all been palmed off as parody. This use of disarming humour has opened an artistic space that is not self-consciously claustrophobic. In addition, during a talk on opening night, Palmer referred jokingly to his collaborative assignment as an 'arty film with drumming', while Cross mentioned deconstruction as part of his working method. The curator, Nigel Prince, said that one of the intentions of the collaboration was to remove the controlling aspect of art jargon: again this opens the intellectual space in which an artist can work.

I have described *The Solo* as a re-enactment, but its relationship to history actually has more depth. This exhibition has been curated alongside a 1970s survey exhibition at the Ikon gallery with the aim of drawing political/sociological parallels

with today. Whether *The Solo* should be seen as atavistic, as a nostalgic tribute, or as revisionist can be judged better by considering it in a deeper historical context. It is assumed that Modernism evolved in the 19th-century from the periphery of Paris, where painters, along with the proletariat and petit bourgeoisie, took the train out to the new suburbs in their newly found leisure time to experience what TJ Clark describes as a landscape of commodities and distraction (factories and regattas). Cross's work is likewise located at the edge of a postmodern landscape of truck stops and pop festivals. White walls and large films are well-trodden territory, yet the ideas about contemporaneous sublime space are exciting and pertinent. Finding a form that moves beyond mannerism and cyclical fashion may be more conceivable through an extended sense of historical continuum which, though complex, is linked to human agency.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.