

FLOATING ARCHITECTURES
AND CONSTANT CENTERS:

SOME PROJECTIONS



DAWIT L. PETROS
HERE NOW,
AND NOWHERE
(PART II: FOR ARCHIE BELANEY)
STILL FROM SINGLE-CHANNEL VIDEO
6:11 MIN, 2006

As Marcel Duchamp's 'readymades' were to prove, much of what constitutes art is concentration and context. Where Duchamp cast his eyes on an object, (often a banal one, like a restroom urinal or a bicycle wheel), positioning it for our gaze, framing it symbolically and making it art, the camera is a *literal* framer of a context: within the purview of its frame all can be refracted and filled with a life of focus.

Dawit L. Petros knows a thing or two about verisimilitude and framing. His bucolic video shot at Pike Lake Saskatchewan, Canada positions the camera low to the lakeshore, looking out across a natural vista. In the foreground, water lilies dot the 'canvas' of the frame giving way to more layers of painterly detail, the lake in the mid-ground evaporating into the gray of the horizon and the heavy clouds hanging in the sky. The video begins with two young men paddling by in a canoe. In the rear is Petros, wearing a straw hat. They are close. They disappear for a short time and reappear improbably deep in the vanishing point of the video/ painting. Now their canoe is somehow full of helium balloons, which Petros begins to cast into the lake. The balloons are attached via ribbons to little pots of ice that Petros had made at home using the lake water. The ice sculptures hold the balloons to the surface of the water until they melt and the balloons drift upwards towards

the clouds and into off-screen obliteration. The ethereal beauty of the brightly colored balloons in flight, the sense of witnessing photorealist painting in motion, is jolted by the jerky physicality of the artist as he flings the balloons from the boat. When done with this exercise, the two paddle away. As the film is on a loop, the canoe reappears in the foreground and the video is back to the initial shot. It is at this point that one realizes the first shot is in a 'true' chronology, the last shot. It takes place *after* the balloons have been released, not before. This simple device, points to the artifice of each stage of the work. There is a gentle remove on the part of the artist, a tongue-in-cheek aspect, an enigma. The work is dedicated to Archie Belaney an English man who came to fame in the '30s as a conservationist and Canadian First Nation's tribesman named Grey Owl. Grey Owl toured England representing the concerns of his 'people' and drew much early attention to conservationism. He was an excellent advocate. On his death the 'lie' was exposed. Today, Belaney has become emblematic of identity as a choice based on empathy and sensibility. Petros, an artist from Eritrea who grew up in Canada and is based in Brooklyn, delights in the layers of masquerade, but the gestures are gentle, the straw hat, the painterly landscape eminently real and representational, the vigorous flinging of the balloons... the balloons...a performative ritual that remains opaque and intriguing to think about.