May 20th - June 30th 2016

ISLA SANTA MARIA 3D

Oliver Husain

The films of Toronto artist Oliver Husain consistently play with cinematic languages and visual codes. Drawing from theatre, dance, puppetry, and animation, with unique costume and set sensibilities, Husain employs his seductive tactics in ways that both absorb and shock viewers into an awareness of their role as spectators within the greater apparatus of film. With *Isla Santa Maria 3D*, Husain works with the relationship between the world of the spectator and the world on screen like never before, utilizing 3D technology for the first time in a new video installation. A complex experiment in the realm of science fiction, the work weaves histories of imperialism, current day myths, and visions of the future with the philosophical and technological devices of their representation.

The film takes as its starting point a myth about Isla Santa Maria, an island said to have formed from the wreckage of a replica of Christopher Columbus' flagship, created for the 1893 World's Columbian Expo in Chicago. In *Isla Santa Maria 3D*, a voice from the future delivers a brief about the life of the replica and its relation to a celebratory legacy of violent colonial conquest. Further expressed as a non-linear history, Husain's film imagines the imperialist gesture as a moment upon which to project the reorientation of the past toward possible alternative futures.

Isla Santa Maria 3D stages a series of fantastical encounters that grapple with regimes of vision and the construction of knowledge. A conquistador moves through a choreographic sequence, dancing with a telescopic viewing device that helps to measure and understand the relationship of his body to the world. A group of visitors gather in an archive of shipwrecks. The figure of the eye becomes a puppet to control. Historical stereoscope images meet current day 3D cinema techniques, and audiences of Husain's installation are cast as fanciful historiographers, their minds and bodies ordered and implicated to create the dimensionality of the scenes unfolding before them.

Working with a porous layering of historic moments, of fact and rumour, of replicas, ghosts, and holograms, Husain relates the political and perceptual narratives of colonialism to the technological developments of linear perspective, stereoscopic imaging, and the experience of 3D film itself, picturing both the figurative and literal overlapping of disparate viewpoints.

—Kim Simon

In the conversation that follows Oliver Husain, Pablo de Ocampo (Exhibitions Curator at Western Front), and Kim Simon (Curator at Gallery TPW) discuss their love of 3D in pop culture, the mingling of screen-space and audience-space, world's fairs and all manner of productive failure.

Kim Simon: Let's talk about why we have an interest in 3D film.

Pablo de Ocampo: I'm not even sure if I can remember why. I think there's an element of going to movies for me that's just nostalgia, which I'm interested in, but then I don't remember why all of a sudden we became obsessed with going to whatever was in 3D. I feel like there was a year and a half where we probably saw every 3D movie that came out. I remember going to see one of the *Final Destination* movies with you, Kim, but I'm trying to remember… why did we go see that?!

Oliver Husain: I remember the first one I joined you for was *Step Up 3D* which was really one of the best. I vividly remember one shot: it's a love scene and the couple both have slushies that they're sucking from—they're standing on a subway air vent and there's this rush of air—and then the slushies spill up into the air and fly towards the camera and kind of mingle—their love is represented in 3D by the two slushies in blue and green. A real highlight of 3D cinema!

KS: I hated 3D movies when I was young, I thought they were cheesy. But I got into them around 2007, when a friend who was working as a compositor for mainstream Hollywood films had just finished her first 3D film—a remake of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth.* So I went to see it to support her. I really didn't want to go, and anticipated that the 3D effect would make me feel seasick. But I went, and my friend instructed me

that there's a "right" place to sit in the theatre for 3D, so your brain doesn't have to work as hard to see the image clearly, and you don't feel sick. You have to sit somewhat centred within the screen. So this was already more interesting than I'd thought it would be, this kind of disciplining of the body in order to see. I remember still thinking that the 3D was really bad, but that it was bad in really amazing ways.

Maybe it was just the early days of what is now the digital process for 3D postproduction or animated 3D, but that was the first time I saw a 3D film where, while they managed to achieve a depth of field, the full image frame had an effect like it was a pop up book. It looked like a series of flat video images moving back in space that made up the composition, rather than modeled objects in relation to each other in space. There was a bizarre and amazing relationship between flatness and depth, and that was when I thought, okay, this is something actually very interesting, even though it's "bad" or a kind of failed 3D. I started thinking about these images from the perspective of screen space and spectatorship—that's when I started to get kind of excited about it and then, you know, became a little obsessed with going to the pop Hollywood films and seeing what I could talk Pablo into seeing.

The reason we went to see things like *Final Destination* is that it became clear that there's a difference between the way, for example, narrative dramatic films use 3D, versus how animated

children's films use 3D, and particularly how the genre of horror used 3D at the time. The way the 3D effect interacts with the frame of the screen was very different across genres at that time. *Final Destination* was dealing with a lot of blood spurting and things like that. Maybe the least interesting way that 3D fails is when something tries to jump out from the screen, but compositionally the 3D object in motion gets truncated when it veers towards the edge of the frame. So it doesn't work, because while there's an attempt at depth, it's always coupled with an immediate flattening as the thing in motion gets cut off by the edge of the screen. We saw a lot of horror stuff that wasn't mindful of that.

PdO: That was one of the things that I liked about *Mad Max* in 3D—it was so classic 80s bad 3D. My strongest memory of 3D from when I was a kid is *Jaws 3D*. There's a moment when the jaws of the shark jettison out of the screen and seem to stop right in front of your face with its big open mouth. I remember that really distinctly and I was thinking about that scene a lot while watching *Mad Max*, which I feel had a lot of that classic horror 3D effects, like stuff hurtling towards you straight from the middle of a frame, in a super cheesy way that I thought was really good.

KS: Interesting, I thought the *Mad Max* 3D actually was focused more on the landscape, and the depth within that broad view. That seems to be the newer use of 3D and how I gained a certain respect for it. It was actually from *Avatar*, which is a terrible, terrible movie but which I continue to say is one of the best landscape films I've ever seen and this was very much because of the 3D. *Avatar* wasn't so focused on making things pop out from the frame of the screen. If you saw the higher end 3D projection, it actually somehow brought the whole frame forward in space and then also really extended the depth back within the frame. The perception of depth in that experience was mind blowing. You'd have these scenes where somebody's running through grass and it felt like you could run your fingers through the grass, and then those stunning, fantastical floating mountain scenes. I love the rumours about how the 3D experience of *Avatar* was so intense that people reported feeling melancholic when they left the theatre… they were disappointed that the real world somehow felt less real.

OH: After speaking a lot about 3D to Ali Kazimi, who acted as 3D consultant on *Isla Santa Maria 3D*—I've come to really appreciate his approach. He's into the perfect illusion of space and volume. I realized through him how complicated it is to make an object actually look like an object, or to give a portrait of a person on screen a sculptural quality. To achieve this sense of realism is a labour of love, a bit like poetry. It seems like a specialized skill to even see these kind of things, and it took me a while to start noticing them. Like the Wim Wenders film *Every Thing Will Be Fine*, which Kim and I went to see. This film got panned everywhere but we got really into it because of the 3D,

which was perfectly crafted. Everything was measured in a beautiful way, it had a lot of static scenes where the eyes could wander around and take in the thrill of space and the weight of things. When I read some of the reviews later, the critics were asking why it even was made in 3D, like the 3D was a useless waste. For us the film couldn't have existed if not in 3D. So I think that's one reason why 3D has failed in a way—it actually seems not to translate into a viewing experience for many people.

KS: Or maybe it's the contexts for viewing that are not helping to make people aware. The typical context for viewing mainstream 3D films, because it came mostly out of adventure and horror films, is not usually a context that you're self aware of your viewing experience, you're not thinking a lot about the artistry of the representation of an object. But with the Wim Wenders' film I find it hard to believe that people really missed that aspect of it. I guess it was quite subtle, because it was so much about interiors and still lives. It was so much about the view through the doorway or the view through the kitchen window onto the table, and the objects sitting on the kitchen table—it made such great use of looking through windows.

OH: Very Edward Hopper.

KS: Yes, not just for the compositions, but there was also a familiar slow pace to it. It was so much about the object space.

When Pablo and I decided to commission an artist to play with 3D technology,

we hoped someone would exploit all these different ways of thinking about 3D—what its propositions are and the interesting ways it fails in representing the world. Oliver, you came to mind immediately since Gallery TPW hosted you several times over the last few years doing smaller experiments that, although they weren't explicitly related to 3D, were considering ideas of vision and perception, and exploding space off the screen. We thought that the formal and narrative abstraction in your practice would be nice with 3D, but it's your attention to both the concept and physicality of the screen that seemed the most generative in relation to the technology—how you often extend the screen space out from the image into your installations—which we thought could be really interesting combined with 3D technology because that tension already exists between the two dimensional space of the frame of the screen and the object-ness that 3D video desires for everything to become. We know that desire is never quite fulfilled— it never quite works, but it never quite works in beautiful ways that we thought would work really nicely with your practice in general.

OS: I see my video *Purfled Promises* (2009), which was shot in 2D [at gallery TPW], as a 3D film in a way, because it was thinking about all of these ideas you mention—like the rules of central perspective and the collision of on-screen space and the auditorium. In *Purfled Promises* there's this constant movement

of curtained windows, or screens within the screen that come up towards you and open to reveal the next tableaux. For its premiere at a cinema in Berlin [Arsenal cinema, as part of "LIVE!FILM! Jack Smith, five days in the rented world"], the film was screened with a live performance. It was projected onto a large fabricated screen that was held up by two performers—Mary Messhausen and produzentin, who both appear in *Isla Santa Maria 3D*. Towards the end of the film they start to carry the screen over the audience, coinciding with the movement in the film, climbing over the rows of seats, and then they put the screen down on the heads of the people sitting in the last row, who had to crawl out from underneath it. So yes, this idea of—a kind of violence—of this spill of the screen into the cinema space… I've thought about that quite a bit in previous work.

PdO: That's inherent in a lot of what you've done in the last eight to ten years. The first time I remember being aware of this in your work was that performance where the audience had to put on glasses that had rhinestones on them, and the film was projected onto the audience…

OH: *The Glimmering Grotto*. It was a side program for my exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University, a collaboration with Alex Wolfson and Bojana Stancic.

PdO: That work was so fascinating. You put on sunglasses that you could barely see through because the lenses were covered in fake gems (putting on dark glasses at the screening also

seemed an obvious reference to 3D movies) but then the 2D film was actually being projected onto the audience—a 3D surface—so it became a shaped projection. But then, your perception of it as an audience member was not really 2D or 3D, it felt entirely internal, because you couldn't see much through the rhinestones on the glasses, just glimmering. Shimmering like rays of light in your field of vision as Alex and Oliver and Bojana narrated a script from the back of the room. So there's this very physical presence because someone's in the room talking to you. But your experience is at once totally spatial, but also completely flat. It's kind of like you're closing your eyes and imagining space. It was a very intense, weird experience, but it's where my thinking about 3D with Oliver's work began.

OH: In the issue of *Public* magazine on 3D [3D Cinema and Beyond, Issue 47] which Ali Kazimi was also very involved in, I came across an essay by Sergei Eisenstein [On Stereocinema, 1947]. He talks about his experience of a 3D movie screening and he writes, as he usually does, extremely enthusiastically about it—how 3D is the future of cinema, that the old cinema is gone—and that was in the late 40s. He draws a history of 3D effects that actually predates cinema and goes back to Baroque theatre and different ways in which theatre performances tried to break down the fourth wall. I find this fascinating, and convincing—that this has been the impetus of innovations all through history, to think about how to break

the division between the two spaces of stage and auditorium by using illusions of perspective. He lists different special effects from the history of theatre, like having a reflective pool in front of the stage that actors would jump into and then leave through a secret underwater exit. Or to work with the theatre architecture itself where the space of the stage and the space of the auditorium are mixed, and using exaggerated perspectives that connect the two spaces.

KS: This mixing of the space of the image and the real also relates to your interest in set design somehow, no?

OH: Yes, the set design for the screening room of *Isla Santa Maria 3D* was very much inspired by Eisenstein's text. The small screen with the reflective stage attached, the low seating and the tall banners create a twisted theatre perspective. In this context, the 3D glasses provided for the viewers could be masks in a baroque court, to hide behind. When not in use, they are set up like a shadow audience of puppets, who keep on watching the film even in moments when the gallery is empty of live visitors. And they mirror all the costumed characters in the film who mostly sit around equally static, watching things through different viewing devices.

KS: Maybe this is a good place to ask about your research on world's fairs and the kinds of technologies they supported and speculated on, and their particular aesthetic gestures that interested you— the use of stereoscopic photography and the dark rides, for example.

OH: One of my first more elaborate video productions was *Q* in 2002, which was based on my experience of the world expo in the year 2000, especially the experience of being an audience or a consumer trapped in the labyrinth of event architecture. I think it's the theatrical quality of these events that fascinate me, and their function as propaganda. They are like nation state designed materialized ideology, and they also are doomed to fail in practical use because of their flimsy temporary façade quality... ready to be re-interpreted by accidental performance. I came across the anecdote, or rumour, about the remains of the replica of the Santa Maria when researching the World's Columbian Exposition which took place in Chicago in 1893. By chance I was reading Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day* and a biography on Walt Disney at the same time, and both open with this world fair. I wanted to know more and look at images, and came across a number of fascinating stories which were loaded with the history of colonialism and imperialism in a confusing, contemporary way. Maybe because of Pynchon everything seemed complexly intermingled and ambivalent. The Columbian Exposition was also a moment of introducing new industrially produced entertainments, for example the first Ferris wheel and Edison's kinetoscope.

Around the same time dark rides began to become popular—indoor amusement park rides where riders in guided vehicles travel through specially lit scenes animated with sound and

special effects. The spacecraft Luna, which appears in my film, is taken from one of these early dark rides - A trip to the moon from the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.

Since we had started our conversation on 3D film with Hollywood and the movie industry as it's main reference point, it was a great fit. And then when I researched further I found this huge archive of stereographic images of the fair—about 300 of them. My favourites are of the more random attractions, like the Austrian puppet display or the Iowa state exhibit of statues made of corn. There was also a very creepy giant statue of Columbus which made it into the film. These stereographic photos were sold as souvenir albums with a stereo viewer at the time. It's so perfect and ironic how 3D is this eternally promising futuristic novelty, the continuous next big thing that has actually been a part of popular entertainment since the 1860s. It has failed as many times as it has been resurrected, and right now it is in a state of decline again.

KS: I'm wondering about *Isla Santa Maria 3D* as a work of science fiction and the ways it thinks about time…

PdO: Right… Future is an idea that's quite complexly and brilliantly dealt with here. I think it's one of the structural strengths in the film, this blurring of timelines between the past and the future. Oliver is really exploiting a classic speculative fiction trope here: ambiguity of when or where something is happening in a relative time to earth in the present.

This is all over the history of sci-fi narratives, but one of the great examples is of course the final scene of *Planet of the Apes*, when Charlton Heston's character comes across the ruins of the Statue of Liberty on the beach and realizes that he is not on some distant planet, but in a distant future on Earth.

Oliver's film doesn't have the same big reveal as *Planet of the Apes*, it clearly situates itself in a historical narrative that skips around from Columbus in 1492 to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 to the gathering of representatives of other planets in 2294. But Oliver uses this non-linear timeline coupled with some wonderful choices in production design to bring a nuanced ambiguity to how time is perceived. I'm thinking here of Dr. Hologram in the plain black Victorian dress; the siting of the Conquistador in what is clearly a contemporary skyline of condo towers; and the crowd at the beach, like Dr. Hologram, sporting late 19th century Victorian apparel, but with a sort of futuristic neo-drag makeup scheme.

KS: Oliver, can you talk a bit more about how the link between the history of linear perspective and colonialism plays out in your work?

OH: I think this connection was there even with *Purfled Promises*, the violence of central perspective I was mentioning earlier. Central perspective and colonialism are both inventions of the renaissance, they determine each other. I mean, a lot of filmmakers and artists have made work about the violence of

the gaze of the camera, and how it was used as a tool for control and war from the very beginning of its invention. With 3D technology, this seems even more obvious, it's very much based on the same concept of the singular viewpoint. I learned that for a 3D projection, there's only one seat in the theatre which has an ideal, undistorted view—somewhere in the centre, elevated—everybody else experiences the space on screen slightly egg shaped. This connects back to the baroque theatre, where the seat with the best viewpoint was reserved for the monarch. In *Isla Santa Maria 3D*, these ideas are more danced about than talked about. They were the basis of the choreographies developed in collaboration with Naishi Wang.

I just thought of one more 3D film that's really important to me, which has the opposite of the Ali-Kazimi-approach of realism. It's a Siegfried and Roy biopic [*The Magic Box* (1999)] that was made in the 90s and released only in IMAX and it was definitely the first 3D film I ever saw. It was a biography focusing on the childhoods of Siegfried and Roy created with the aesthetic of a paper theatre, it was very consciously designed this way so it looked like a magic box that opens and then these paper theatre sets jump out. It was amazing, really beautiful. It was full of blonde German boys in Lederhosen—politically wrong and uncomfortable images that made it even better.

Of course, I also love Indian cinema, and there are some Indian 3D movies

that have also been very formative for all of this. I remember way before I saw Godard's *Adieu au Langage* (2014)— where he experiments with the two channels of 3D film in incommensurate and destructive ways - that I saw this movie in Bangalore, Upendra's *Katari Veera Surassundarangi* (2012), a local production, a 3D movie that was set in heaven and hell. They must have made it in a rush because often the two layers of content for the two eyes were actually different—the two channels were doing separate things but overlapping each other—like one channel suddenly switched to video blue, while the other kept on showing the film, or they were suddenly mirror images of each other. It's a painful moment when suddenly the eyes don't match and you go cross-eyed, it's a very physical sensation.

KS: So the low production 3D film made in India had all kinds of interesting effects that predate Godard's experiments with the same "mistakes."

OH: Yeah, of course they didn't intend for it to happen, but it was so effective.

KS: Right. I was reading a number of texts written for the Brooklyn Art Museum 3D film festival and one of the authors, Ben Coonley, who teaches film production was writing about his 3D film class and how he assigns his students a project to use 3D production methods "badly"—so that the left and right eye image stream are dissonant with each other rather than harmonious—in order to really put to use that kind of brain frying effect in the service of some kind

of psychological and narrative potential, which I thought was really interesting. It has its limits of course. You don't want people having seizures or vomiting from trying to watch the film.

OH: There is a moment when the island appears for the first time in *Isla Santa Maria 3D* where the layers separate and you can't look at it anymore because it's too uncomfortable but then it suddenly flips into two different images in your brain.

KS: There's something wonderful about when things go a little bit wrong with 3D… In Hollywood films often my favourite parts are the end credits because the pop out effect is often so exaggerated with graphic text. It's particularly great when the lights come up while the credits are still rolling. The lights come up, and the screen space is destroyed because you can see the whole theatre but it's pure pleasure for me because suddenly–

OH: Because the spaces are mixing.

Kim: Yes! Because the illusion is still working so powerfully even with the light and real space mixing with the 3D animation. It's bizarre.

PdO: That highlights something I think we're all interested in, this relation of illusion and the real and the potential in that moment of a slight breakdown of the illusion, which somehow makes the real seem fabricated. Those credit sequences are really amazing for that because everyone—the audience, the projectionist, the cinema and the people

that are making the film—don't really care about trying to make an illusion anymore, yet they're still using the apparatus to make the illusion. So it's like the curtain has been pulled away and the illusion's still there—what does it mean that the illusion is still there even though everyone's already agreed that the illusion is over?

Artist Biography

Oliver Husain is a filmmaker and artist based in Toronto. In 2015, his solo exhibition beside the point was shown at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto; and his work was included in Architecture by Artists at 221a, Vancouver, Depth of Perception at Oakville Galleries and Magick Lantern Cycle at Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg. In 2016 Husain's work was featured in a group exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and a solo exhibition at Gallery Clages, Cologne. Later this year his work will be exhibited at The Galleria Mall, Toronto. His work is represented by Susan Hobbs Gallery, his website is www.husain.de

Gallery List of Works

1. Oliver Husain
Isla Santa Maria 3D
Stereoscopic video projected from
Blu-Ray with 5.1 surround sound, 17 min,
2016

Isla Santa Maria 3D was co-commissioned
by Gallery TPW and Images Festival with
generous assistance from the Canada
Council for the Arts.

1