

How's The Ghost?

The funfair. An ever-evolving creature with a past that is bursting with enterprise and mythology. Writer and showman, **Mitch Miller**, grew up in its cradle. He is currently researcher and script writer for a feature-length documentary, *The Ghost Show*, which when completed will shed light on the important role travelling shows played in bringing cinema to the masses. The film will also give a rare, truthful insight into a community many encounter only in fleeting, sugar-fuelled moments as they queue for the Waltzers or are mesmerised by the deft work of the candyfloss weaver.

How's The Ghost? the exhibition that accompanies the documentary project, asked Glasgow-based multimedia artist **Chris Dooks** to respond from the outsider's perspective. He was immediately enthusiastic, recalling the ghost train that once operated in his hometown of Redcar, Cleveland.

The creation of something new from something old has long been a theme for Dooks, whose artistic interests span music, film, photography and live-art. His remixing of old film footage began with his degree film, *The Sound of Taransay*, and in 2000 the film and soundtrack *To Look North*, commissioned by The Northern Region Film and Television Archive, formed part of the artist's first solo show in Middlesbrough. It was exhibited internationally.

Though there is no ghost train in the exhibition, the ride is a good example of how travelling shows constantly developed something new from something old. Ghostly amusements began in the form of theatrical sideshows, spooking nineteenth-century audiences by way of the wonderfully Victorian-sounding illusion 'Dircksian Phantasmagoria', or more commonly, 'Pepper's Ghost'. But times change and audiences demand new attractions. So showmen purchased cinematographs, and soon 'The Ghost Show' meant something different. A crowd scene was filmed and the public were invited to come to the fairground where, for a penny, they would see themselves, their *own* ghost, in a moving picture. The supernatural element in fairgrounds survives today in the form of the haunted house and the ghost train. Over and over, something old has become something new.

So too with the film footage which Dooks has beautifully remixed for *How's The Ghost*, setting it to haunting, original music reminiscent of Aidan Moffat (as Lucky Pierre), and Phillip Jeck. The Scottish Screen Archive provided the original films, mostly amateur footage depicting travelling shows and the towns they visited in the 1950s. From this archive, Dooks has selected charged moments, where vibrant colours and engaging faces reach out to us through gently worn pictures. In a world where everything is about high resolution and mega-pixels, there is a supernatural quality to this work and the way of life it presents.

Dooks's photographic images were gleaned from visits to fairgrounds and yards, a Christmas 'switch-on' and a theatre set. The work, carried out in

Winter 2008, gave him a closer understanding of the people and places behind the shows, the hidden corners of the city where rides are conceived, built and painted, brilliant splashes left behind. It is unsurprising that this is Dooks's most colourful work to date. More recently, Dooks has added fiction to his artistic cannon. His short story to accompany the photographs, *The Last King of Saturn*, brims with colour, meteors and metaphors.

Miller also presents something new for the exhibition. Known mostly as a writer, and as co-founder of Scottish arts periodical, *The Drouth*, here he exhibits a series of drawings and visual artwork exploring themes of migration and community, closely linked to the world of the travelling shows in which he was raised.

In the comic strip, *Abram, A Life*, Abram is updated, drinking orange juice and living in a modern touring trailer. Miller is interested in the theory that Abram was an Amorite Chieftain, and draws attention to parallels between how the Amorites lived and did business, and the way of life for Travellers today, including how they are perceived and often stereotyped by others.

Miller also exhibits a work in 'Travellerology', as he calls it; a socio-schematic drawing of a showman's yard in present-day Glasgow, complete with symbols for units or chalets, and tube-map-like connections demonstrating complex family relationships, business partnerships, bonds and tensions between the residents.

There are more colours and transitions in Miller's final piece. 'Tickets' as they are known in the trade, are normally used to entice the public to fairground stalls with slogans such as 'A Prize Every Time!' Here they take on a more personal note, decorated with memories and family sayings: 'A Sweetie for a Sweetheart.' They suggest the big personalities and warmth to be found in the centre of the hoopla.

How's The Ghost and the associated documentary are timely. Across the UK, planners are sweeping away sites where communities of Travellers have been living, often for decades. They are evicting families and ploughing ahead with roads and sports stadiums. For the shows, times are hard. In researching the project, the artists discovered that the Redcar ghost train, so prominent a feature of Dooks's childhood, now languishes dismantled and dismembered in a lock-up in Bradford.

But the men and women of the travelling shows are determined to maintain their family businesses and traditional lifestyle. They are holding fast and are, once again, on the search for something new.

How's The Ghost. Till 20 March 2009. Market Gallery, Glasgow.

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Can you Identify...?

-An extract from the Ice House Blog: www.icehousehelmsdale.wordpress.com

I always get lost on my way to visit the archives at The School of Scottish Studies. The place is tucked away like something mislaid, hidden in the corner of an old terraced house in George Square, part of Edinburgh University. You'll find it up some stairs, through a library, behind a locked door, up some more stairs. Anyone can make an appointment, but I bet most people arrive late and a little disorientated. It's probably a pain for the archivist, but this isn't a bad state of mind to be in when you're about to delve into the wonders of the sound archive. It's the closest thing to time travel I've ever experienced.

I've used the sound archive twice before, once for my work on ingressive pulmonic speech, and again researching *The Tin-Kin*. Nothing has changed. Shelves holding huge leather books cover one wall. Each book is indexed on the spine. They begin some time in the 1950s in the top left corner of the room, and are ordered chronologically. On the opposite wall are more books and boxes of cassette tapes. These are recent recordings. A filing system fills the entire third wall, and opposite, across the huge table in the middle of the room, there are two windows overlooking The Meadows. At a smaller desk under the windows there are two reel to reel machines, a computer, and a tape recorder; in a box on the left, tangled headsets.

I do a keyword search, and in seconds am presented with a series of numbers that correspond to certain books. I scribble down the numbers.

SA1957.051

SA1973.078

SA1977.086

I look for the first volume. Top left corner of the room. 1951...52...54...56...

1957 is bound in maroon leather and it slips easily from its place on the shelf. I open it at the huge table, and without bothering to pull out a chair, peel through the pages. When I find 0.51 I lay my finger on the top of the smooth paper and let it run over the print. Recorded 17-23/08/1957 /Hamish Henderson/ Portree-Wick-HELMSDALE

The process of finding is a drip-drip of information, each step hinting at what might come next. It's exciting wondering where each trail will lead. I take all the numbers to Caroline, who brings the tapes up from a store. The old ones, which need to be threaded onto the reel to reel, have to reach room temperature before use. I telephone Chris to discuss what I hope we've just found. I read and look out the window, and occasionally I glance at the small, square boxes, waiting for the past to warm up. I have a good feeling about today.

One by one, I go through the recordings. Two contain songs, one an interview, and two more are a combination of songs, stories and material from a linguistic survey carried out in the mid 1960s. I listen right the way through. Closing my eyes, I am in a living room somewhere in Helmsdale with an old man and a wife making tea. I can hear her placing the cups on the saucers. Every fifteen minutes, half a century ago, a clock chimes on the mantelpiece.

The interviewer is a posh voice, probably dressed in tweed. He prompts a man to say a long list of words, most of which rhyme. They go through these long lists in a systematic way. Sometimes they slurp tea.

Eat. Heat. Beat.

Gate. Great. Grate.

“Mmm hmm,” says the interviewer after each word. He sounds like a doctor doing a medical examination.

Catch. Cat. Caught.

The Helmsdale man goes over some words quickly. Other times he stops and explains himself. “Round here we say this... That’s how we say it.” This man’s name is Neil Mackay and he was obviously a fisherman from Helmsdale. His wife, Mrs Mackay sings Gaelic songs. She has a beautiful voice.

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