



Omer Fast, *Godville*, 2005, two-channel video projection, 50 minutes. Installation view.

## OMER FAST POSTMASTERS

The interviewees who appear in Berlin-based artist Omer Fast's new two-channel video installation *Godville*, 2005, are actors who inhabit Colonial Williamsburg, an eighteenth-century town turned theme park that's known in trade parlance as a "living-history museum." Fast began each interview as if questioning the historical character—militiaman, mother, slave—and then led each subject gradually toward the present, toward reflection on the act of

inhabiting a character from an earlier time.

This would be rumination enough for some filmmakers, but Fast intensifies the project by cutting and reassembling the interviews, ignoring the boundaries between past and present to create a netherworld—a time out of time. Here ideas, sentences, even words are created by the filmmaker, and historical continuity is replaced by fragmented narrative. For example, as we listen to a single sentence assembled from different parts of an interview, we see the sunlight, filtering through historically accurate bedcurtains, changing from early-morning cold to afternoon warm and back again.

The purpose of this manipulation is to dislocate the viewer, but it is possible, with sufficient concentration, to piece together various fragments of the original interviews. At times, Frances—dressed in gown, corset, and workingman's gloves and speaking in a measured, theatrical cadence about raising her sons—seems to exist firmly in the past. At others, when she takes her gloves off, for example, she seems more a part of the present. But these clues, like many others, turn out to be red herrings. Ultimately, the problem is too complex to solve. *Godville* works against not only narrative logic but also the idea that knowledge of the past grounds us in the present. Frances, gloves on or off, seems not to know which era she lives in; while telling the story of the death of her character's sons in the Revolutionary War, she begins to cry with startling (and creepy) realism.

Any smugness we might feel about our contemporary racial tolerance and general open-mindedness is undone by Will, who plays a slave in the museum and delivers a terse condemnation of the kind of empathy

tourism that the living-history museum encourages. Following his speech, he delivers, in a preacherlike voice, the work's powerful coda: a long Dylan Thomas-style incantation of God's manifestation, a vision of the creator that's all-encompassing—both hopeful and despairing—and may have been created entirely by the artist.

After watching the video, we are left wondering what was scripted and what (if anything) was spontaneous, what represents Fast's interpretation of what was meant and what might serve his larger themes. Even when the interviewees turn hostile at various points in the video, deriding the artist's attempt to understand their lives and predicting that he'll edit the interviews to fit preconceived ideas about his subjects that are at best inaccurate, we are well aware that these tirades may or may not represent their actual views. They may even represent the artist's anxiety about the ambiguous morality of his project rising like a bruise to the surface.

Themes of time, history, and truth have been well mined in contemporary art; it is hardly unusual to be told that what we hold to be truths about the past are as flimsy as a stage set. Fast, one of whose previous projects involved interviewing extras (some who played Jews and some who played Nazis) from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), certainly trafficks in these themes—asking why Americans revisit history in this particular fashion, evoked to order by people whose identities are both real and assumed, colorfully attired yet consumed by everyday reality. But *Godville* goes further, showing us a set of possible consequences of living in a world of shifting truth, in a world where intimate familiarity with the past does not so much arm us for the future as disarm us in the present.

—Emily Hall