

REVIEWS CYPRIEN GAILLARD



Real Remnants of Fictive Wars, Part V, 2006, 10m film, 7 min. Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London

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LAURA BARTLETT GALLERY, LONDON
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French artist Cyprien Gaillard brilliantly captures the insidious creep of catastrophe in his seven-minute film *Real Remnants of Fictive Wars, Part V* (2006). Set in the grand garden of a chateau, the camera tracks slowly along a balustrade with a group of established trees beyond it. What appears to be a cloud of smoke bursts from the central tree, a spontaneous combustion without flame, as if the tree, rather than absorbing the carbon dioxide from the air, has reversed the process and is pulsing poisonous spores back into the environment. Fittingly, the word 'environment' comes from the Old French *vivre* – to encircle – and Gaillard's film, rattling forth from a huge Czech 35mm projector, surrounds the spectator with the concise, mesmeric power of a short, savage poem. The spectral dispersal engulfs the scene, then fades, leaving ash-like deposits on the tree's branches. Gaillard's film acts both as secret evidence of an experiment and a prescient fantasy of what may come. Despite the architectural barrier posed by the ornate balustrade, toxic air pollution or radioactive fallout will get us all. The smoke (apparently foam ejected from fire extinguishers harnessed within the tree) settles, leaving a beleaguered and depleted-looking tree. The sear lawn and empty ornamental pond reinforce the crisis of cultivation in drought conditions, and the setting echoes Renoir's 1939 *La Règle du Jeu*, which warned of a social urgency of a different kind. While Gaillard's earlier smoke-without-fire interventions were enacted at the foot of tower blocks, evoking race riots, teargas and the desire to demolish inadequate social housing, by locating his 'explosions' in a pastoral site he shifts the dramatic focus. Here the trees can no longer be relied on to supply the classical harmony of an idyllic view.

Political and ecological concerns also frame *Belief in the Age of Disbelief* (2005), a series of seventeenth-century etchings into which Gaillard has inserted drawings of tower blocks. The ancient landscape invokes dated words like 'copse', 'dingle', 'arbour' and 'glade', while the buildings exude the polite discretion of developer's plans working to make the constructions look 'natural', adding to, rather than distorting, the contours of the bucolic surroundings. Gaillard teases out the culture/nature binary, since the etchings have already cultivated a habit of thinking about how landscape should be composed and admired. These same cultural attitudes foster the belief that natural resources are inexhaustible, that human culture transcends nature. Gaillard's project is about safety and threat: it's becoming harder to view a green expanse without seeing it as endangered. By contrast, Gaillard's series of Polaroids in display cases (*Geographical Analogies*, 2006), set largely in California, have an unfinished look. He seems less sure of himself in the place where they invented the fenced-in wilderness of Yosemite and evergreen suburbs. *Cherry Smyth*

