

A 21st-century take on art films

A US television series offers insights into the history and practice of artists from Marina Abramovic to Ai Weiwei



A still from Mary Reid Kelley's *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*, 2011

The sixth season of “Art in the Twenty-first Century”, a biennial of art films, begins on 13 April on the US public television channel PBS. Four hour-long programmes over four weeks will document the work of 12 artists and one collective.

Programme one, “Change”, looks at the life and work of the US photographer Catherine Opie, the Ghanaian-born Nigerian resident El Anatsui and the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei. Opie is filmed making photographs of the Lake Erie shoreline in her hometown, Sandusky in Ohio. Taken at the same spot at different times of the day, the photographs were commissioned by a hospital. Opie tells how the shoreline was a refuge from her troubled home life as a

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child and that she “used the landscape to change my emotional state”. The hospital pictures are supposed to give patients the possibility of a similar emotional rebalancing. El Anatsui talks of being raised in the fervent religious atmosphere of his uncle’s mission house after the death of his mother when he was a baby, and how his horizons changed when he left to go to art school. Now, in his studio in Nigeria, he employs armies of young men to help with the construction of his massive bottle-top installations. He says textiles was his least favourite subject when he was a student, and yet these constructions closely imitate fabric, with patterns resembling traditional Ghanaian cloth designs. The programme makers were producing their piece on Ai Weiwei when he was arrested in China in April 2011. They obtained one of the first interviews after his release, where Ai, who had been told by the authorities not to talk about his detention, refers to a marble sculpture of a security camera, demonstrating his attitude to the authorities when he says: “Once it has become marble, it’s surely being archived. It’s not functioning any more.” Eli Sudbrack and Christophe Hamaide-Pierson, the principal figures in the collective Assume Vivid Astro Focus, are among the contributors to the second programme, “Boundaries”. Sudbrack is based in New York and Hamaide-Pierson in Paris: they discuss the way they make their collaborations work when they are divided by an ocean, from the exchange of ideas to fully realised installations. In the same programme, David Altmejd is seen at work in the studio, creating a typically dense and complex sculpture, claiming: “I think faster than I can speak. My brain is not the best when it comes to verbal language.” The other contributors are the Japanese artist Tabaimo, who represented her country at last year’s Venice Biennale and who makes video installations that draw on traditional and modern drawing styles in Japanese culture, and the US sculptor Lynda Benglis, who only appears towards the end of her segment, her distinguished career represented by much use of archive material.

The most striking segment of the series comes in programme three, “History”, which dispenses with a conventional documentary structure and engages directly with the history and practice of several artists. The director and artist Charles Atlas starts close in on Marina Abramovic’s eye, before slowly tracking back, as she relates a short history of her life as an artist, until she becomes a

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distant figure in the centre of the frame. Almost straight away the camera reverses, slowly heading back towards her, finishing again close up on her eye as she completes her story. And in a demonstration of her stamina, she seems to have remained entirely still throughout. The accompanying notes state that, in this case, “the artist profile itself is an original work of art”. Programme three also focuses on Glenn Ligon during his major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York last year, and on Mary Reid Kelley, who employs members of her family as performers as they shoot her video *The Syphilis of Sisyphus*, 2011. The final programme, “Balance”, follows British-born landscape painter Rackstraw Downes as he looks for locations in Texas, declaring: “There is no solution to the representation of the world. As soon as you take a three-dimensional world in which there is movement and place it in a two-dimensional surface, you move into the world of metaphor, inevitably.” Sarah Sze moves in the opposite direction as she creates a sculpture based on lines of perspective for New York’s High Line and an installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, for which she placed objects in the space between the air-conditioning vents and the windows. The minimalist painter Robert Mangold discusses his studio practice and is shown overseeing the installation of glass panels at the federal courthouse in Buffalo, New York, though it’s not made clear if he intends them to have the same transformative effect on the building’s troubled users as Opie’s hospital pictures.

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