FEVER IN THE INSTA-ARCHIVE

An Interview with Dan Browne

CLINT ENNS

Dan Browne is an artist who lives and works in Toronto, Ontario. His work features superimposition, time-lapse photography and kinetic abstraction. Working with analog and digital technologies, Browne often transforms his personal photography into dense, and often overwhelming, streams of images that challenge the idea that an image is a frozen moment in time. In the digital era, the frozen moment in time has thawed, producing a stream of Insta-images to be judged, ♥ed, and forgotten. By manipulating his own immense photo collections, Browne is experimenting with the ways in which people both produce and engage with personal archives.

I first recall seeing Browne's *memento mori* (2012) at the Images Festival in Toronto, a work that garnered several awards and established his reputation as a filmmaker to watch. A retrospective of Browne's films was shown at Early Monthly Segments in Toronto, and included the first public screening of *The Lost Cycle* (2016), a suite of seven films which includes *Passage* (2016) and *Field* (2016), two extremely beautiful 16 mm works that perhaps best represent his commitment to the lyrical tradition. *Palmerston Blvd.* (2017), an intimate portrait of his home and family through a series of photographs, recently played Wavelengths at the Toronto International Film Festival and will be transformed into a forthcoming artist book. He has collaborated with many filmmakers, including Peter Mettler, Michael Snow, Carl Brown, R. Bruce Elder and members of the Loop Collective.

Dan and I have known each other since I moved to Toronto in 2011. This interview was conducted over email, but reflects many of the conversations and debates we have had over the years. It has been edited collaboratively into its current form.

Dan Browne, TOP study for *Palmerston Blvd.* (2014), and BOTTOM *Palmerston Blvd.* (2017), frame enlargements.

Clint Enns: Your newest work *Palmerston Blvd.* is an example of extreme time-lapse photography, a bay window of your house shot in time-lapse over the course of a year complete with shifting seasons and emotions, presence and absence. Do you see the work as a moving painting, complete with details?

Dan Browne: *Palmerston Blvd.* is very closely related to traditions of still-life painting, but is it most definitely a work of cinema, as it is entirely concerned with duration. I wanted to create a durational image in which gradual change renders itself visible, in which objects could be understood as events in slow motion. I had started taking photographs of my living room window as a means of working towards an increased sense of awareness, a means for experiencing how seemingly static things encountered amidst one's daily existence change slowly over the time. By the time the project was finished, I had taken 250,000 images (or twice as many as all of my other photographs combined) and inadvertently documented my first year of domestic life as a parent. While shooting, I was constantly finding new ways to frame object and light relations with respect to the window. I ended up sitting on the material for over a year, during which time I completed the films in *The Lost Cycle*, and was struggling to find a way to work with all the material. I eventually processed it all at a highly accelerated rate—the weight of the time passing at this speed had a strong emotional resonance and I knew this was its proper form.

CE: There is a flicker section in *Palmerston*. Can you talk about the use of this strategy in relationship to the film?

DB: One of the major struggles with shooting a dynamic subject like a window is that the camera is much more limited in terms of light sensitivity than what the human eye can observe. An exposure set in accordance with light outside the window meant the inside would be too dark, and the subtle gradations that interested me were lost. I attempted to compensate for this by using a technique called exposure bracketing, where the camera takes multiple images at different exposures that can be later combined into an HDR image, but leaving these images alone produced an extreme flicker that I found startling. This flicker produces a crisis in the representational quality of the image, and the point in the film where it occurs coincides with the moment that we gave our notice to leave the apartment. It became a way of marking an emotional crisis in relation to the space.

CE: What is lost in *The Lost Cycle*: innocence, direction, loved ones, treasured moments? How were they recovered?

DB: *The Lost Cycle* is really just a convenient term for seven 16 mm films I released in 2016, after returning to my negatives in order to prepare them for distribution. My early 16 mm films are simple constructions made without post-production, and mostly edited in camera. In the process of cleaning my studio, I came across a bunch of unused materials that had never seen the light of a projector, which I thought offered experiences as rich as my other completed films. They are sketches, but the sketch can be a beautiful thing in its rough and unfinished status. I decided to print them along with my finished works as I'm not convinced it will always be possible to print color 16 mm negative in the same way as it is done today. It's an ad hoc title for a scrappy collection that can be shown together or separately, and I suppose the title really should not be capitalized, because it's not meant to serve as a proper noun. Many of the bits and pieces were shot with bigger designs in mind; several are intended as serial forms, subjects I will continue to return to.

CE: In *memento mori* superimposed images flicker on the screen creating the sensation of a near death experience. Is the film an

attempt to create that mythologized moment when your life instantaneously flashes before your eyes?

DB: *memento mori* is an investigation in how we might learn to "live without dead time" – dead time being understood as related to the notion of 'cinematographic time' critiqued by Henri Bergson, in which a false continuity of frames is substituted for an embodied sense of duration. On one level, the work can be understood as presenting the cliché in which the images of one's life flash before their eyes at the moment just prior to death. As Friedrich Kittler has observed, this notion only became popularized *after* the invention of cinema (a medium whose development also happens to mirror the rise of psychoanalysis). So the image archive explored in the work is interpreted as a sort of machinic subconscious—a realm of cameras, electricity, and digital information that influences our own subconscious, similar to Teilhard de Chardin's concept of the noosphere, or the Akashic record. Using all the 'pretty' pictures in my archive, I destroyed them through superimposition to the point in which they become barely legible. The pace is intentionally aggressive—with literally every frame a different combination of images, and as many as twenty images overlaid at once—and this produces a multi-dimensional density similar to Cubist forms that is to some extent impossible to fully grasp. It is an aggressive attack on the viewer's eyes and ears, to foreground the violence perpetuated through our somnambulistic relation to media, a relationship where we sit passively and hand over our agency to technology, watching the world ending while feeling completely detached. But it also offers a new (and, I think, exciting) mode of vision that gradually emerges for viewers who are able to commit themselves to this radical form of experience.

In *memento mori* I was trying, desperately, to demolish that detached and fragmented relationship and open up a new kind of space for agency. Audiences in the 1960s used to walk out of experimental films in disgust, but today's audiences are so passive that hardly anyone walks out. My aim was to overwhelm people's senses to the point where they might have to close their eyes or look away for a moment, and thus remind themselves they are a body, and are choosing to subject themselves to a mediated experience.

CE: You often work fluidly between different media, alternating between various formats. Can you talk about medium specificity within the context of your work?

DB: I make art using the tools and resources I have available. I developed my practice at a time of epistemic crisis, when digital and analog technologies were constantly shifting in terrain, and as such I have always moved fluidly between media. I am intrigued by new technologies of
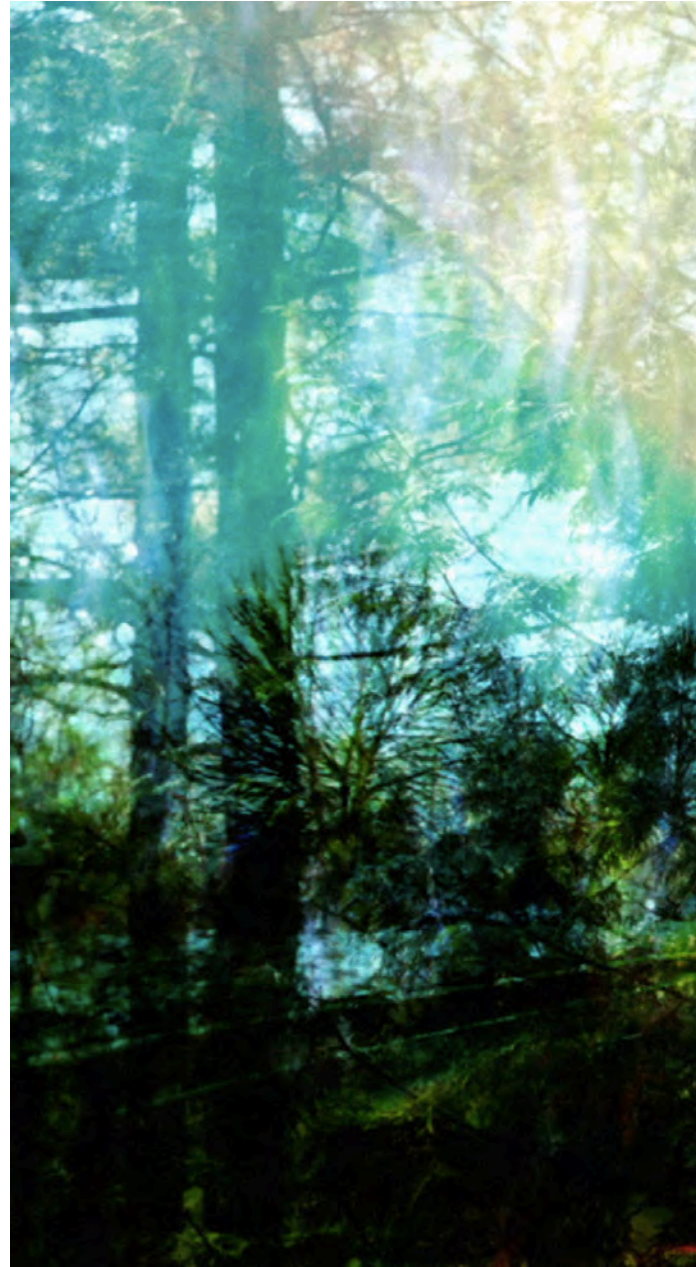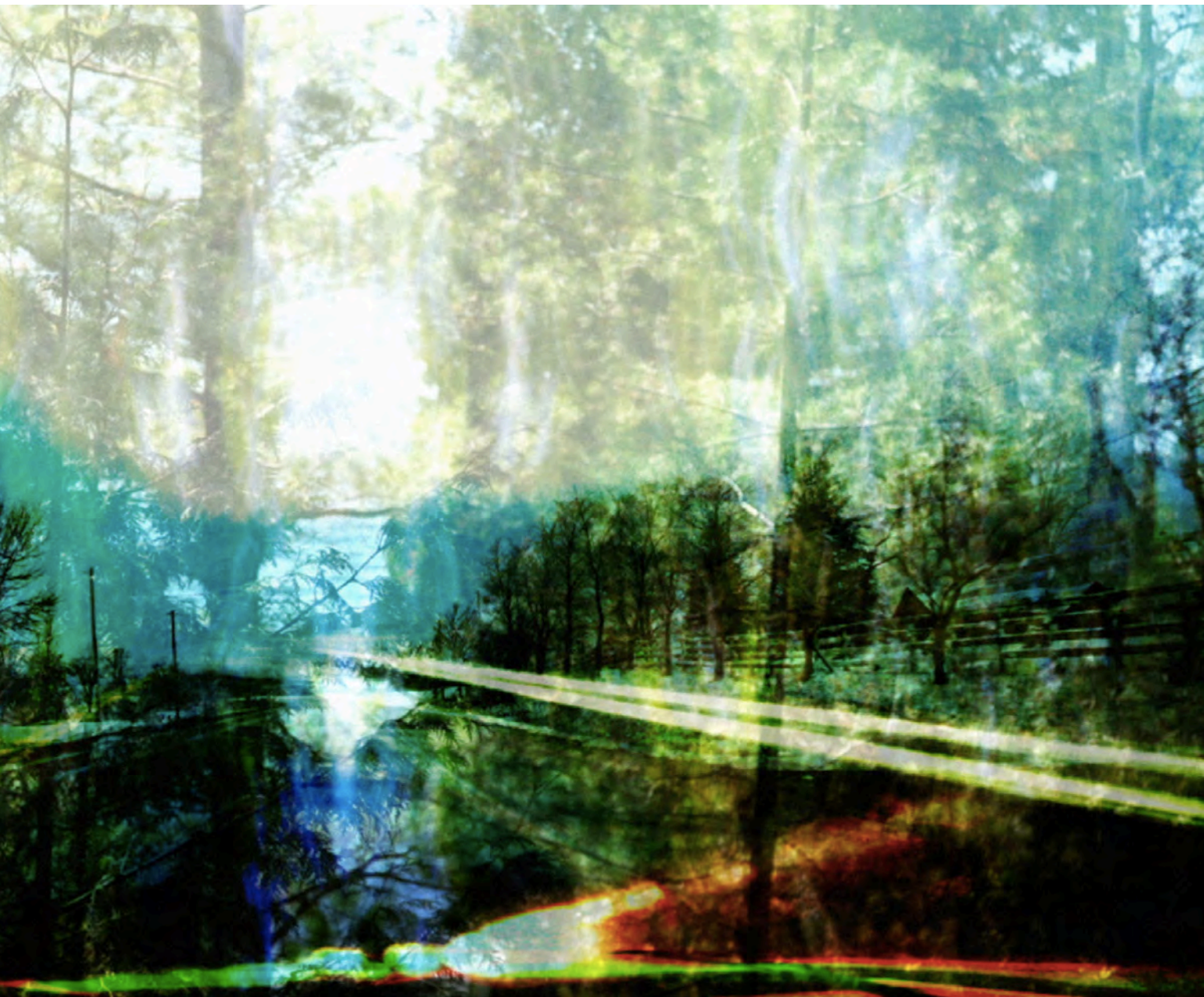
Dan Browne, *momento mori* (2012), frame enlargement.

communication and the potentials of media like Instagram (which is how *Palmerston Blvd.* originated) or 360-degree photography video. But working with analog media is also important to me, because it foregrounds different physical concerns and processes that can serve as a relief after endless digital file management. By alternating between tools I find it possible to uncover mutual illuminations, sympathies, and divergences that shine a light on new territories for exploration. Even if the new tools are transforming the methods of expression, it is the artist's role to find ways to take them up and impart them with significance. It took me a decade to figure out how to do that with digital technology, but I feel I have reached that point now, and the most recent digital restorations I have seen have forced me to reconsider some of my previous stances on medium specificity. My recent work *Poem* (2015), an interpretation of a text piece by Michael Snow, was made digitally and several people asked me what 35 mm camera I shot it with. I will continue to make and exhibit on film when I can afford to, just as I continue to DJ with vinyl from time to time, but it seems utterly regressive to reject digital as somehow not a legitimate poetic form, and its fractional cost allows me to produce work without going broke.

CE: You have often referred to your installation work as 'video paintings.' Can you elaborate?

DB: I use the term 'video paintings' for my installations since they function in a similar fashion as paintings: silent visual works that do not necessitate a viewing experience within a discretely bounded section of time. For me, video painting is a way of neutralizing the weapon of the screen, by reclaiming the aesthetic potential of the screensaver or music visualizer, a form that adopts certain esoteric ideas like color theory, visual music, and synesthesia, and renders them utterly banal. You can tell where our culture's interests are based on the types of images that are common, and today these are mostly limited to a small slice of experience involving human social activities, while natural events, processes, and patterns are largely ignored.

I view my works produced in this style as prototypes for the medium of video wallpaper, a form of visual 'furniture music.' I have been probing many potential spaces and contexts for these works, and to date several have been shown as public installations on large screens, but I hope they will all be shown within the same space at some point.

CE: *Grids* (2013–16) is an eight-hour installation loop created from a series of thirty-three sections each performed in a single, improvised take using software typically made for VJing. However, I have seen you perform dynamic variations of it live interacting with musicians. How do you decide which forms the work will exist in?

DB: I started *Grids* at a time when I did not have the ability to shoot new material, and the series remixes older or borrowed material through software presets that I can play with using MIDI instruments. The work grew out of live performances that took place in environments outside the cinema or gallery. As a result, it was natural for it to shift back to performance, which I've done in several contexts now, including collaborations with Karl Fousek at Vector Festival 2016, the composer Núria Giménez-Comas at 21C New Music Festival, and other local improv musicians, DJs, and electronic music producers. The software that I use has the ability to respond in real-time to audio, and so the immediate synesthetic link between sound and image is foregrounded in these contexts in a way that draws forth the improvisatory nature of the project.

In terms of how the *Grids* series is meant to exist, I view it as open source. Everything is online and can be streamed. If people want to rip it and remix it, or add music, I don't particularly mind. I think it would be great if they were used to replace the 24-hour news channels that are so common to televisions in restaurants and bars.

CE: Can you talk about the nature of some of your collaborations?

DB: After I studied with R. Bruce Elder, I worked as one of many assistants on his film *The Young Prince* (2007). My roles included sequencing and processing images digitally, bucket hand-processing color 16 mm, and sound composition. Bruce's work in *The Book of Praise* cycle, of which this feature is a component, is deeply engaged with chance operations and this has led him to an unconventional working process where a number of collaborators are involved in every step to produce or arrange material with a great deal of free reign within those areas. Working with Carl Brown on soundtracks for his films has been a similar experience, in that he provides me with a duration and a set of materials, and total freedom from that point onwards. In both cases, the soundtracks were never synchronized to the image before completion, a strategy that proposes a different methodology between sound and image than traditional notions of sync, one that is closer to the collaborations between John Cage and Merce Cunningham, where both components are parallel streams existing in a proximate relation with the potential for synchronicity and dissonance to emerge through chance. The work that I did on those soundtracks, which combine music, voice, and effects in a layered collage akin to a form of *musique concrète*, led to the polyphonic soundtrack for *memento mori*, especially the sense of an open-form structure where elements are given the opportunity to resonate and form organic connections in a structure that is equally ordered and free.

Working with Peter Mettler developed out of a friendship established after a number of years of seeing each other in various mutual social circles. I saw *Gambling Gods and LSD* (2002) while at Ryerson, where he had also been a student, and in a bizarre twist of fate I bumped into him just prior to breaking into an

abandoned factory to shoot a documentary, and we climbed to the top of the roof of the building together. As if that was not enough synchronicity, I had just seen his first feature *Scissere* (1982) while reviewing preliminary footage from that shoot, and there were identical images in it from the same building, made twenty years earlier. A year later, I encountered Peter again at a rave in a forest, and recommended he read a book by the anthropologist Jeremy Narby, which eventually led them to collaborate. At some point after that, I moved up the street from him and he asked me to do assembly editing on *The End of Time* (2012). Since then, I have helped manage some of the technical and distribution aspects of his studio. Peter has been a huge influence on my work in terms of my live mixing practice—this is something he has been exploring since the technology was quite limited, and he has a sophisticated series of instruments, including personalized software designed by Greg Hermanovic (the creator of Touch Designer and Houdini), and extensive libraries of footage.

CE: When I introduced Peter Mettler to David Rimmer, they also bonded over their involvement in the rave community. Your work often induces a form of drug-like trance state. Can you talk about your work in relationship to VJing for raves and some of the altered states that sometimes are associated with that scene?

DB: Altered consciousness is definitely a key interest in my work, but I don't think drugs are necessary to access such states—they can provide a path to certain doorways, but once the point is found, it remains available. McLuhan once said that LSD is basically akin to reading Joyce for lazy people, and I think that is a funny way of revealing that the most difficult works of art are really about the aspects of human experience that are quite basic and fundamental—experiences like trance and prayer, which fall outside the domain of admissible reality in our society. The music that interests me uses frequencies to impact the entire body, and is as haptic as it is aural. To experience it fully requires an embodied presence in the context of a proper sound system and, in the best-case scenario, generates an experience in which one can see past the curtain of the self by dancing and becoming fully lost in it. It proposes a different relation to media than the model of cinematic spectatorship, but this significance of the body being fully affected in a perceptual (rather than a conceptual) relation is something that has been important to my work. I believe that ritualized experiences involving technological expression can actually help to repair the (a)/effects of contemporary living.

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