

DECEMBER 2005 REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS ART IN AMERICA

Omer Fast at Postmasters

Colonial Williamsburg is a re-creation of the town as it flourished in the 18th century, from period buildings to actors playing historical characters. In his recent show at Postmasters (concurrently on view at London's Institute of International Visual Arts), Israeli-born, Berlin-based Omer Fast responded to this museological conceit with a complex artifice of his own: the two-channel video *Godville*, projected on back-to-back screens in the gallery's front room, and 12 pencil-on-paper *Godville Portraits* (all 2005). Fast's demanding work thoughtfully and humorously addresses topics like national identity, the nature of performance, and the slipperiness of truth.

For the 50-minute *Godville*, Fast separately interviewed three costumed actors, two in the interiors where they meet the public, one in the locker room. They exist, as the artist puts it in press materials, "unmoored and floating somewhere in America . . . between reenactment, fiction and life." They spoke to Fast partly in character as 18th-century townspeople and partly out; the artist then confused this distinction by aggressively reconfiguring the interviews. He cut, rearranged and spliced the tape back together, building individual sounds or longer passages into dialogues the actors never actually spoke. At times there's a startling visual staccato as the characters' postures and gestures change jerkily from one video fragment to the next. They mix discussions of the Revolutionary War and the Gulf War, and jumble terrorist attacks with guerrilla actions against the British. According to Colonial Williamsburg's Web site, its mission is to interpret "the origins of the idea of America." As Fast's interviewees slip between past and present, they suggest that the idea of America is very much still in formation.

Some viewers (myself included) came to understand Fast's method only gradually. The rear screen showed the interviews; the one facing the entryway presented slow pans and resting shots of unremarkable American scenes—suburbs, amusement parks, malls. As there is only one audio track, the voiceover at first seems bizarre; yet taken together, the two projections wind up alluding to the subtler artifice inherent in the documentary genre in which Fast ostensibly works. Fast himself never appears and we never hear his voice, but his protagonists all attack him: Will, a black man, charges him with unconscious racism; Jack Burgess accuses him of cynicism and lack of interest in his subject, concluding, "You're just afraid."

The majority of the 8½-by-11½-inch *Godville Portraits* are finely detailed bust- or half-length renderings of the various costumed actors alongside closely handwritten texts that seemingly describe the artist's meetings with them. But these accounts are themselves fabrications. For example, some of them allude to Fast turning the camera on and off without his interlocutors' knowledge, which, as the gallery director told me, never happened—and it gradually becomes evident that there is no more "documentary" truth here than in the video. There's a delightfully absurd humor; in the penultimate drawing, an actor describes fathering a furry offspring with flippers instead of arms and legs. The creature smiles out from the final sheet, a metaphor for the joyously indeterminate mix of truth and fiction Fast has here begotten.

—Brian Boucher

View of Omer Fast's *Godville*, 2005, two-channel video installation, 50 min at Postmasters.

