



BREAKING THE SURFACE

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"Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me".

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Front and back cover detail from **Chrysalidding** digital print.

Opposite, still from **S173** video installation.

Centre pages, extracts from **Field Work, An Earlier Mission, MD902 and Moby Dick**. (Moby Dick uses original film footage held at the Imperial War Museum, reference ADM 3814)

Following page detail from **Airshow** bookwork.

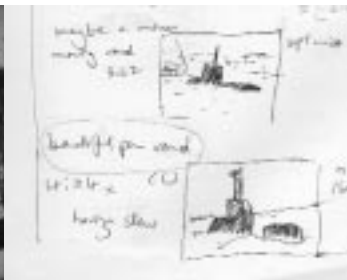
The work of Joanna Griffin harbours unease. Working with the substance of surveillance - the digital recording, the monitor, the film archive of innocuous military exercises, the note-taking, the watching and waiting - she resists creating a theatre of spectacular narratives. Rather the impact of her work is quiet and slow-burning. It elicits a strong sense of foreboding in the unsuspecting viewer by exploring the associations of a society under observation.

The subjects of her video installations, online interventions and book works over the past three years are the stuff of Boys' Own - MD902 police helicopters, Polaris submarines, German U-boats and human torpedoes. Though largely filtered out of the final works, her research processes are just as intriguing: pursuing undisclosed helicopter sorties above the skies of Birmingham, retrieving footage of military exercises in the Firth of Clyde, uncovering post-war marine footage from the Imperial War Museum and tracing the pursuit of individuals on

heat-sensitive cameras. Given the clandestine character of such material, one would expect the resulting works to be charged with the adrenalin of pursuit. Yet through this research, Griffin discovered that along with the heroic, cinematic associations of her subjects came the sheer mundanity of their activities - the uniformity of exercises and absence of thrilling manoeuvres, an often laborious process of surveillance for a rather pedestrian conclusion.



By confining her locations to non-descript conditions - urban skies punctured by the odd tower block or bleak, drizzly seascapes - she foregrounds the particular invasive character of the machines themselves. They appear anthropomorphised. In MD902, the helicopter is traced like an erratic insect, moving across the surface of the screen. Then a red flashing light flickers on its tail and it is transformed into a creature from John



Griffin chose to amplify the tension between this mythical secret world and the mundane reality of their activities. In doing so, she has produced an exhibition of works far more insidious in character than a Boys' Own story, and one that indicates the often imperceptible integration of military and everyday activities.

Wyndham's surreal imagination, in his book *The Chrysalids*, "I looked up too. The sky was no longer clear...I could make out one of the strange, fish-shaped craft that I had dreamt in my childhood, hanging in the sky".

Just so, the body of the Polaris submarine, in negative becoming a

white whale-like body lumbering through the black waves, conjures up Melville's 'nameless horror', - an uncontrollable entity never quite fully possessed, always just out of reach.

Griffin's employment of the moving image darts from super-8 footage, to manipulated archive film to hand-held digital camera. 'An Earlier Mission', in particular recalls the early video manipulation of North American artists

of modern technological structures.

There is one still image caught in the encyclopaedic interactive flip-chart of material on display in 'Field Work'. The submarine eases into the harbour at Plymouth, outlined against the hillside of houses and gas tanks. It appears all the more intrusive and incongruous in this location, as if grafted onto the landscape. It is here in the confrontation of the English picturesque seaside and

such as Steina Vasulka, Lynn Hersmann and Sharon Grace, who in the 1970s fully exploited the potential for electronic manipulation of sound and image. But Griffin's work departs from the more formal aesthetic concerns of this early video synthesising and likewise from the nostalgic associations of super-8 by her dogged investigation

military hardware, that Griffin ruptures both the panoramic seascape and heroic mythology of the submarine. Here the dramatic footage of the submarine breaking the surface is replaced by the rather more sinister, slow entrance into the harbour - a collision of the known and undisclosed activities of the everyday.

Claire Doherty

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Joanna Griffin has been a practising artist for ten years. She studied Fine Art at Edinburgh University, spending a year at the University of Pennsylvania and then returned to the States to take up a scholarship at Tamarind Institute of Lithography in New Mexico. She currently lectures in Fine Art Printmaking at Winchester School of Art.

In 1995 she was invited to Leipziger Lichtdruck Werkstatt to make collotypes, a rare kind of facsimile print. This was funded by the British Council, University of Wolverhampton and Birmingham City Council. In 1997 she won funding to visit Chile through the International Visual Artists Exchange scheme, working at the print workshop Taller 99 in Santiago, but also making research visits to the La Silla and Las Campanas observatories in the Atacama.

This publication refers to work which is the result of research over the last three years and ongoing. Currently this is funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Board with previous support from a University of Wolverhampton Sabbatical (2000/1) and West Midlands Arts Creative Ambition Awards (1999 and 2000).

Exhibitions and showings of work include *Sea* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2002), *As it is* at Ikon Gallery, *Boxing Gear* at B16 Gallery, *New Work* at the Mappin Art Gallery, *At OMSK* at Cambridge Darkroom Gallery, *Messages* at Birmingham City Art Gallery, the Goethe Institute New York and Kuppelhalle der Dresdner Bank Leipzig, *Revolution* at the International Convention Centre Birmingham (2000).

Previous solo exhibitions have been at Galeria del Grabado de Chile, Santiago (1997), The Bond Gallery Birmingham (1995) and Worcester City Museum and Art Gallery (1993).

Thanks go to Ian Hutchinson and Josephine Lanyon for their help with planning and enabling the presentation of this work, to Andy Moss for technical management, to Claire Doherty for critical input, to Angela Weight for her continued interest in and support of this project and to Jane Fish for making the Imperial War Museum Film Archive so accessible.

Breaking the Surface is funded and supported by:
Plymouth Arts Centre
Picture This Moving Image
Arts and Humanities Research Board
University of Southampton

