



1 *Urth*, 2016

16mm transferred to HD video
 Single channel projection
 19 minutes
 Commissioned by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; with thanks to CDO and the University of Arizona Biosphere 2

2 *Slow Action*, 2010

16mm anamorphic transferred to HD video
 Four screen video projection
 45 minutes
 Commissioned by Picture This and Animate Projects in association with Matt's Gallery, London

3 *Things*, 2014

16mm
 Single channel projection
 20 minutes
 Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella

3a *Bedroom*, 2014

Digital print, 102.5 x 102.5 cm framed

3b *Fable (Mialle)*, 2014

Pencil on paper, 36 x 27.5 cm framed

3c *Fable (Leader)*, 2014

Pencil on paper, 36 x 27.5 cm framed

3d *Useful People to Know 1-10*, 2014

Ten silver gelatin prints, 23.5 x 30 cm framed

All works are presented courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

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BEN RIVERS URTH

*But the game is up! We must all die; nor leave survivor nor heir to the wide inheritance of earth. We must all die! The species of man must perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses; the noble proportion of his godlike limbs; his mind, the throned king of these; must perish. Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude? Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, will beast pasture, birds fly, and fishes swim, and the winds fan universal nature; when man, the lord, possessor, perceiver, and recorder of all these things, has passed away, as though he had never been? O, what mockery is this! – Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, 1826*

Ben Rivers's most recent film, *Urth*—commissioned by the Renaissance Society for his exhibition of the same name—opens with this passage from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, the first major fictional account of the destruction of humankind.

Urth takes its title from the Old Norse word suggesting the twisted threads of fate, as cited by philosopher Timothy Morton in his recent book, *Dark Ecology*. Filmed on location in Arizona's Biosphere 2, this new work imagines a scientist living alone inside an experimental ecosystem after the world outside is ruined. A voice-over written by author Mark von Schlegell traces the anonymous figure as she records her final days and hours in the hermetic structure. The resulting film is a cinematic mediation on ambitious experiments, artificial environments, and visions of the future.

The artist's newest work shares with his previous films an interest in utopias: the desire to make the world anew tinged with the realization of its impossibility. His projects frequently draw on elements of apocalyptic literature, science fiction, and adventure tales to explore the opening up of possibilities to which these visions can give rise. In a 2013 interview, Rivers notes, "It's all about freedom, an idea I come back to quite often in my films: what the idea of freedom means. There is a sort of hope in the films I'm making, from looking at possible ways of being, further down the line."

Two previous films by Rivers similarly explore the relationship between humans and the natural and constructed world. *Slow Action* (2010) offers an imagined study of island biogeography across four locations, considering how these self-contained sites have and might continue to evolve. Its quasi-ethnographic narrative, also written by von Schlegell, imagines future societies grappling with rising seas and soon-to-be-lost ecologies. *Things* (2014) is a film collage divided into four “seasons,” juxtaposing found imagery, objects, and sounds with domestic and nature scenes that are at once intimate and unsettling. It is presented alongside a series of drawings and photographs.

For Rivers, film offers a crucial means for reimagining how and where we might live, and he deftly employs elements of documentary, fictional, and experimental filmmaking to create works that are both familiar and unsettling. In the interview, he goes on to describe being driven by “a desire to make cinema that is not a representation of the world, but that comes from actual people and places—and is then transformed through cinema into something that isn’t the world, it’s new.”

The following descriptions of the three films in *Urth* were written by Rivers and are excerpted from his forthcoming monograph, *Ways of Worldmaking*:

Slow Action, 2010

I come from an island, an odd one with a long and checkered history, with strange habits and a history of literary explorers of darkly optimistic utopias, beginning with the founder, Sir Thomas More, moving through Samuel Butler and Richard Jeffries, to Anna Kavan and J.G. Ballard... I like to think about small communities trying to find their way through possible utopias, and how, if isolated, these possibilities could differ so radically from one another. What does utopia mean? There is certainly not one answer. *Slow Action* was made for the anniversary of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, (and the title comes from a sub-chapter of the book). I decided to concentrate on island biogeography, considering how islands were perfect examples of isolated environments, which can evolve and develop in very unique ways dependent on different factors of influence. I imagined a future Earth, where sea levels have risen, travel has been stymied, and societies have developed in unique ways, cut off from one another. I brought in Mark von Schlegell to write the narration, because his command of hyperbolic sci-fi language was far superior to mine, after reading his novel *Venusia*. We had an exciting back and forth correspondence, talking about Victorian utopian novels and the different ingredients for the four island utopias described in the film, and unreliable observers and narrators. While I travelled to the Atlantic and Pacific, Mark wrote, not knowing exactly where I was going, and hence free from the shackles of any documentary facts. The result is ethnographic science fiction.

Things, 2014

I was asked if I could make a film where I didn’t travel, so instead, taking a leaf out of Xavier de Maistre’s 1794 novel *Voyage Around My Room*, I turned the camera on my own home. A kind of sequel to *Phantoms of a Libertine*, I first looked through my objects and collected images as if they belonged to a stranger, wondering what links could be found between these things. I decided not to question an idea if it came into my head – so when I filmed a squirrel in my garden and remembered the recording I like to listen to of Andy Kaufman on David Letterman, then those two things would go together, only to be questioned after, now that they exist together. Repeated clues start to reveal themselves, but as I go deeper I know less what those clues mean, and I become the stranger I was only pretending to be in the beginning. The intangible nature of representation remained strong even when looking at a subject I knew well, as the final chapter transforms my home into an incorporeal rendering of the place I thought I knew so well. The final image is a return to the beginning of the film, and the beginnings of representational images, but now the wall isn’t really there.

Urth, 2016

I shot it at Biosphere 2 near Oracle, Arizona. It’s appropriate that the nearest town is called Oracle, because the film predicts a near future, perhaps forty years ahead. I am collaborating with Mark von Schlegell again, to write the final log entries of perhaps the last woman on Earth, sealed inside the biosphere, now called *Urth*, living within the artificial temperate zones of desert, jungle, and ocean.

Ben Rivers: Ways of Worldmaking will be published in autumn 2016 by Kunstverein in Hamburg, Camden Arts Centre, Triennale di Milano, and the Renaissance Society. The publication includes new essays by Melissa Gronlund, Ed Halter, and Andrea Picard alongside extensive images from Rivers’s films and texts by Robert Pinget, Renee Gladman, and Henri Michaux, among others.

Urth is curated by Solveig Øvstebø.