

John Woodman Observes What Is Natural

Experiencing time always involves the consumption of physical and mental energy. Works of art also call for this consumption—this is often particularly true when time is a constitutive element in them. But whereas, for example, a long-time photographic observation does not require an equally long reception time, continuous-shot film works with identical recording and playback times demand exactly the same viewing time: in fact, they have to be virtually lived through from the first to the last frame. Unlike feature films, for example, which want to make us forget their production time as much as their two-hour running time, artistic real-time films intensify the experience of the passage of time by indifferently presenting concrete, often casual observations instead of narrating their own constructions. This is also true of Andy Warhol's famous, roughly eight-hour film *Empire* from 1964 (although its playback time does not correspond to the recording time of the Empire State Building at the time but was rather stretched by the artist by almost twenty percent using slow motion).

Inspired by Warhol and by Michael Snow's one-shot cinema, John Woodman (b. 1947) has been filming primarily nature and landscape since the 1970s (initially silently on Super 8 and 16mm, and from 2010 onwards also with ambient sound on digital video), for the most part in real time and without cuts. In doing so, he often focuses on those gradual subtle shifts in light and space that accompany changes in weather. In a spiritual kinship to nineteenth-century Impressionist *plein air* painters such as Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, and especially Claude Monet, Woodman's films sharpen the perception of the present in the open air and allow the passage of time—the becoming and passing of the now—to happen: directed by clouds, wind, water currents, or the position of the sun, the images present their own momentum, which changes every minute. They may appear static or moving, abstract or realistic, dramatic or monotonous, and yet, when viewed, they make one feel first and foremost that, at that very moment, such distinctions are completely meaningless. The ostensibly minimal content of Woodman's “observational studies”—a tree in the wind, clouds drifting in the sky, a boat on a lake—is not a narrative but rather a concrete temporal sequence. From the artist's point of view, the filmed sequence serves solely to create a contemplative mood.¹ The habitual expectation of events is thwarted; instead, the naturally justified uneventfulness of the natural world is to be acknowledged.

Like almost all of John Woodman's films, *November Morning* (2011) was shot in one continuous take. Since the camera was not mounted on a tripod but held freely in the artist's hand, this film appears all the more like an animated photograph or *tableau vivant*. It marks a high point in Woodman's investigations into the metaphysical meanings of light and how its change influences our perception of space, time, and place.

¹ Cf. <http://www.johnwoodman.net/> (accessed October 25, 2021).

November Morning presents a roughly twelve-minute view of a romantic valley in the county of Cumbria in northwest England (figs. pp. #-#).² The sun has risen but is obscured and filtered—sometimes more, sometimes less—by low clouds and mist. Thick morning fog rises, leaving trees and meadows only dimly visible. At times, crows fly through the scene; and from off-screen, the morning chirping of birds can be heard, occasionally accompanied by the distant hum of an airplane. The constantly changing light models this landscape and emphasizes its spatiality. In this continuous state of change, wind and temperature become almost physically perceptible. Although, or precisely because, apart from nature in flux, nothing is happening, what is observed is astonishing: sober yet filled with silent spectacles, “pure real time” seems to manifest itself visually here, supported by the camera swinging slightly in the framing. The swinging seismographically reveals the physical concentration of the filmmaker who has lived through this slice of a natural phenomenon while at the same time “capturing” it. The camera records the images as Woodman observed the situation and as we would have seen it had we ignored all distractions there and lost ourselves in the multiplicity of the present.

Woodman’s films were and are spent time: their recording focused on a prototypical here and now, and their viewing likewise. A prerequisite for this is the conscious acceptance of aimless duration, which slows everything down and makes one temporarily forget individual circumstances and ambitions. Such a meditative existence in the passing of time makes the unity of transience and permanence concretely tangible. *November Morning* thus unfolds in a much more exciting and mysterious way than one would have suspected at the beginning: the images can change breathing, pulse, and mental activity—that is to say, one’s own psychic and physical energy—and lead to a state of calm, enchantment, or even enlightenment, when one’s own self is recognized in the whole.

It is the reduced representation of nature through which Woodman strives to enable deepened experience: concentrating on ostensibly uniform things should lead to an appreciation of their magical uniqueness. The world is to be seen as it is—Independent of human rhythms and directions of gaze. One realizes that every narrative is simply an intentional and therefore artificial construction that this world does not actually know. Woodman’s reductions unmask our habit of wanting to interrupt the passage of time through abstractions (to stimulate perceptions), through cultural productions (that arouse emotions), or through language (that stimulates the mind). For all this does not occur in his films and should to be blanked out by us in order to regain natural time in the face of natural phenomena.

The comparative film work *Ruskin’s Ponds* consists of twenty-two individual videos shot between 2009 and 2012 in the gardens of two former residences of the art historian, natural philosopher, and social reformer John Ruskin (1819–1900) in Brantwood (Cumbria) and Denmark Hill (London).³ Ruskin’s writings on the observability and representability of natural

² Cf. <http://www.johnwoodman.net/html/NovemberMorning.htm> (accessed October 25, 2021).

³ Cf. <http://www.johnwoodman.net/html/Ruskin'sPond.htm> (accessed October 25, 2021).

phenomena (especially the chapters “Of Truth of Water” in volume 1 of his *Modern Painters*, 1843–60) were an important reference for Woodman. The videos range in length from three to twenty-five minutes and depict—again in a single continuous shot with a hand-held camera—water surfaces from a forest pond (in Brantwood) and a pond in an urban park (in Denmark Hill). Having been shot in different seasons, these surfaces reflect various stages of the cycle of the surrounding vegetation. Each video has a different lighting atmosphere and—although the works are occasionally exhibited comparatively—stands on its own.

The video *Ruskin’s Pond – Brantwood (March 2011)* has a running time of nine minutes and forty-two seconds. Through the black silhouettes of trees and their winter-bare branches, one initially thinks one is looking at the sun in the sky; in fact, however, it is the reflection of the sun on the surface of the pond (figs. pp. #-#). A current of water models this reflection and brings it into fleeting movements, in the case of stronger churning even into a brief ecstatic dance; the image breaks down into abstract, twitching forms, only to stabilize again shortly afterwards. The motif—a natural water surface that reflects the surrounding nature—dramatically unsettles the representation of nature. Over the entire running time of the film, passing clouds change light intensity and contrasts, while, at the same time, the rushing water of a fountain can be heard.