

# GLADSTONE

Sarah Goffstein, "Cyprien Gaillard: Nightlife," *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 4, 2018



## CYPRIEN GAILLARD: *Nightlife*

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Cyprien Gaillard, *Nightlife* (still), 2015. 3D motion picture, DCI DCP, 14:56 min. © Cyprien Gaillard. Courtesy the artist, Sprüth Magers and Gladstone Gallery, New York and

Warring gangs rumble violently en masse in front of social housing in Eastern Europe. An elaborate light show builds suspense before a similar structure in Paris topples. Large numbers of fire extinguishers detonate in a Vietnamese forest, evoking the mists of Caspar David Friedrich and enacting large-scale pollution. These vignettes from Cyprien Gaillard's most known films prime

knowledgeable viewers for anticipation of *Schadenfreude*, or “joy in destruction,” but Gaillard’s recent film, *Nightlife* (2018), moves in a different direction. At Gladstone Gallery the viewer dons 3D glasses and is transported to a strangely suspenseful and quasi-psychedelic experience evoking cataclysm and unease. Instead, we are given a nocturnal, botanically framed tour of cultural phenomena, historical occurrences, and the environments of peripheral spaces. While the experience of the film is deeply sensual and devoid of people, Gaillard conducts his viewers into a subtle, multivalent conceptual web of ideas that asks them to consider the human history of destruction and social unrest.

The film opens with a pan of what first appears to be the rumpled surface of a leaf. As the camera revolves around the object, we see that it is actually part of the broken base and destroyed ankles of Rodin’s *Thinker* (1903) in front of the Cleveland Museum of Art. Recorded with the absolute precision of a 3D simulation, this is an ingenious way to open the film: with a conflation of nature and the violence enacted upon a cultural icon often used to represent Western philosophy. As the footage traces the contours of the sculpture, the destruction feels like the result of a looming threat rather than an act of protest from 1970 against the Vietnam War. Here Gaillard is using the *Thinker* as a framing device, in which the Enlightenment capacity (and responsibility) of thought becomes an unwitting Romantic ruin, bringing up broader questions about the “nature” of humanity, violence, and by extension, civilization.

We next find ourselves in a desolate Los Angeles hinterland following a trail of discarded beverage containers leading to anthropomorphized Hollywood

junipers. Their fronds billow in semi unison with a monstrous energy as they flail against a high industrial fence beyond which an expanse of city is illuminated. The tone turns towards that of an edgy nightclub as we move to a decorative border space lining what appears to be an elaborate underpass. Planted with slowly bobbing birds of paradise, thrashing palms, and undulating split leaf philodendron, here the motion of the plants is agitated, although less violent. Low dramatic camera angles, slow motion footage, and colored lights give certain shots the quality of a rock video. Plants behave like raptured fans and striding stars, moving along to a melancholic, dreamy, rock steady beat with a sampled chorus from Alton Ellis's *Blackman's Word*.

While no actual people are depicted, the plants take on human qualities. Indeed, the hothouse flora featured are all non-native species to Los Angeles. Like their transplanted human counterparts, they are the inhabitants of the margins that give the city its character. After all, it's the infrastructure and people at the periphery that fuel our civilizations. However, these same places are more vulnerable to prevailing conditions: whether they are environmental, economic, or political. Just like a moment in the film where bark is blasted off of a tropical tree when subjected to hurricane force gales, the winds that power the party can turn violent. The timely agitation of Gaillard's periphery is contemporaneous, with deep political unrest among the most vulnerable US citizens: immigrants, African Americans, and artists.



Cyprien Gaillard, *Nightlife* (still), 2015. 3D motion picture, DCI DCP, 14:56 min. © Cyprien Gaillard. Courtesy the artist, Sprüth Magers and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Seamlessly transitioning to observing the annual *Pyronale* fireworks in Berlin, we glide past manicured hedges and a Third Reich social realist sculpture in the 1936 Olympic Park. A suspended vantage point affords the view of the military formation in which the festive artillery is released and is an immediate reminder of the bellicose, or in this case, the Fascist origins of such spectacles. With the ingenious use of drones and post production editing, the camera suspends us just at the brink of danger in the midst of dazzling explosions and trailed fronds of smoke—oddly resembling the plants that had preceded them.

We are left with an unresolved sense of threat as a spotlight hovers from above to illuminate a large bare-branched oak. Presumably a drone then revolves at closer quarters around the tree, casting glaring light and branch-shaped shadows onto the building beyond. Surveillance and possible military invasion seem imminent. This is an ominous portrayal of the oak planted by Jesse Owens at James Ford Rhodes High School in Cleveland after receiving it as a gift from Hitler when he won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics.

The foreboding footage of the tree suggests that its history is unresolved. Just as the partially destroyed *Thinker* looked lost in thought, as if considering the weight of his choices, we are offered the opportunity to connect the dots meaningfully between the carefully framed parts of the film. To me, it brings up implied questions about whether boycotting the 1936 Olympics would have helped prevent Hitler's rise to power as some had thought at the time. Even though Jesse Owens's success as an African American athlete disproved some of Hitler's ideas about race, the long shadow of social injustice and escalating international tensions continues to haunt us. No *Schadenfreude* is necessary here. Like the *Thinker*, it is easy to be lost in thought—does our nature have to enact the kind of widespread destruction which our past indicates?