



Omer Fast, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011), frame enlargements. © Omer Fast. All images courtesy James Cohan, New York.

OMER FAST

James Cohan Gallery, New York
March 25 - May 7, 2016

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” So wrote Joan Didion over 40 years ago in *The White Album*, her essay sketch of a chaotic, post-’60s California. Didion concluded that her diagnosed neurosis was a reasonable response to this world of jarring and fragmentary events. Omer Fast is occupied with a similar project: to show traumatic experience that doesn’t cohere into tidy narratives. Fast’s videos unfold through an expansive deployment of cinematic storytelling strategies that explore the complexities of trauma in a society enmeshed in mediated, 21st-century warfare.

The white-walled space at James Cohan Gallery is dark and divided up into a warren of three rooms, each containing a roughly 40-minute video. The built rooms in the gallery are organized to guide you from one video to another, but the pieces are chronologically out of order. None truly have a beginning or end; they each

make roughly the same kind of sense no matter where you step into the narrative. Testing genres such as the interview and the reenactment, and story forms that utilize multiple perspectives, shifting identification, repetition, and simultaneity, Fast exploits the viewer’s impulse to try to make sense of the story.

The first piece the viewer sees in this exhibition, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011), weaves together real and reconstructed interviews with a soldier who operated a Predator drone in Afghanistan from a room in suburban Las Vegas for six years. Over the course of this single-channel work, Fast’s abrupt narrative non sequiturs pile on to build an unstable exposition. The video slips between verité interview footage and a dramatization featuring a recognizable Hollywood actor engaged in uncomfortable banter with the interviewer. Stories woven by the interviewee traverse the interior of a

casino, a hotel hallway with a Coen Brothers feel, the sad tale of a wannabe train conductor, aerial views of Las Vegas at night and the journey of a family fleeing their home. While the details of this last segment sound like an episode unfolding in Afghanistan or Iraq, Fast visualizes the action in what looks like the suburbs of Nevada or California, deploying a kind of geographical transference to map a story from ‘elsewhere’ onto a familiar landscape. This technique underscores the leaky and uncomfortable psychological atmosphere of the video as a whole, which conveys a sense of disorienting trauma and psychological displacement. Through such strategies, *5,000 Feet is the Best* seeks to reconcile a new paradigm of shifting vantage points and zones of occupation: seeing the world from above while positioned on the ground; determining the course of people’s lives in a faraway place remotely, on a screen,



Omer Fast, TOP *Spring* (2016), BOTTOM *Continuity* (2012), frame enlargements.

as if playing a video game. “You’re talking about bodies and places—Euclidian shit,” says a protagonist at one point, as if it is a novel topic.

The videos in the next two rooms are centered on the bourgeois nuclear family and home. They draw on psychological coming-of-age narratives – concerned mostly with family dynamics and the return from, or preparation for, the theater of war – while employing touches of magical realism. The first piece you encounter is *Spring* (2016), which reads as a prequel to *Continuity* (2012), positioned in the last room. In addition to the sound that bleeds from one room to another, the videos’ use of shared actors, storylines and even dialogue blurs the boundaries between the two works, maximizing the effects of an opulent suburban family cast as a foil for unsavory feelings and experiences.

Spring plays out across an arrangement of five screens clustered together—some vertical, some horizontal. The presentation lands somewhere between a display in a Panasonic store and a stained-glass window in a modernist cathedral. The multiple screens allow Fast to experiment with simultaneous views. Sometimes one continuous shot is spread across all five screens, but the landscape convention that usually aligns our identification neatly with the singular view of the camera is a bit broken. Sometimes one or two screens show a character in the same space shot from an alternate angle, such as an additional view of the father looking over from a screen to the side while lying in bed with, but not facing, the devastated mother. Other alternate views are of simultaneous action in another place, such as the landscape going by as a boy is riding his bike down the street toward a fateful adventure. This refractive arrangement of images is a kind of slick trick, but does in fact add layers of spatial and narrative experience that underscore the work’s emphasis on the potential duplicity of those close to us. In *Spring*, turbulence behind the smooth surface of fresh-faced European youth leaks out in several ways. Perils of modern life such as the military as a default career option, online predators, radicalization via the internet and inappropriate or illicit sexuality all contribute to a sense of unavoidable menace while shining with a poppy gloss of violence reminiscent of Tarantino.

Both *Spring* and *Continuity* mine familiar trials of an adolescent/post-adolescent man at home: emotionally invasive parents, issues of privacy, drug use, the articulation of an independent self in the thicket of the family tableau. In Fast’s work, however, these ordinary matters take on grotesque proportions. *Continuity* achieves this effect largely through uncanny shifts during repeated representations of conventional

scenes from family life, such as conversations at the dinner table. By repeating the same scenes with different actors, and with changing depictions of the hallucinations experienced by his characters, Fast constructs a kind of *Groundhog Day* replete with macabre jokes that Freud would relish (maggoty pasta, a soldier peeing in front of an Afghan family, etc.). With its relatively simple, single-channel structure—the same story told three times—*Continuity* is perhaps the most conventional of the three videos. But it is no less unnerving. Its strategy of repetition reads here as an urgent attempt to resolve unbearable experiences.

Are *Spring* and *Continuity* working out the experiences of family and adolescence through a fictive representation of the trauma of war? Or is the residual and pervasive trauma of war worked out through the colorful depiction of adolescent discomfort in the nuclear family? As the mannered stories test the limits of veracity, and characters violate safe conventions of the familial, only one takeaway is clear: intimacy is perilous.

Through the years Fast has shown himself a master of blurring genres of fact and fiction. Here he joins the likes of Michael Haneke in taking a stab at bourgeois middle-class life as a site rife with emotional violence and uncanny ruptures.

Fast continues to be a contemporary bard, illuminating ways in which today’s traumas, though heavily mediated by technologies, continue to persist in ever complex forms.

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