



FERN SILVA'S ROCK BOTTOM RISER

We see the elongated roots of tan-colored trees as a voice provides commentary, describing an illustration or a photograph that doesn't appear on screen: ". . . they're wearing clothing that's very au courant with very particular branches of the European aristocracy. . . here we see self-fashioning at its height. . . 'this is how I want my person, my family, and my sovereignty to be read.'" Viewed from high above, the camera observes an undulating spring of bright orange lava. It is surrounded by an expanse of gray wrinkled slag. As the camera slowly moves along the scene, greenery and the rectangular roofs of buildings enter the frame at the outskirts of the volcanic landscape, seemingly soon to be enveloped in the plodding stream of lava. The heavy beat of electronic music counterplays with the image.

Fern Silva's 16mm film *Rock Bottom Riser* (2021) has shown this year at Cinéma du réel, New Directors/New Films, International

Film Festival Rotterdam, and the Berlin International Film Festival. It is his first feature-length work, but not a "first" in the sense of being a departure from the trajectory of his oeuvre; it is more of an expansion of the methods and tendencies of his short films into a full-length work.

The work is a portrait of a place, Hawaii, much as Silva's *Ride Like Lightning, Crash Like Thunder* (2017) looks at New York State's Hudson River and *Wayward Fronds* (2014) considers Florida's Everglade region. These place-portraits are constructed as a patchwork of tableaux, singular or recurring, jarring in their use of sudden changes from nature to the human world. Sometimes oblique narration from an unseen voice is used, but oftentimes the scenes are presented without comment. The editing structure that jolts us from sequence to sequence is made all the more arresting by Silva's sudden editorial changes in the

rich soundscape of the film. Likewise, the sound design in *Rock Bottom Riser* by Sergei Tcherepnin, Lea Bertucci, and the filmmaker, stands out as a crucial element in the film's structure and texture as much as its visuals.

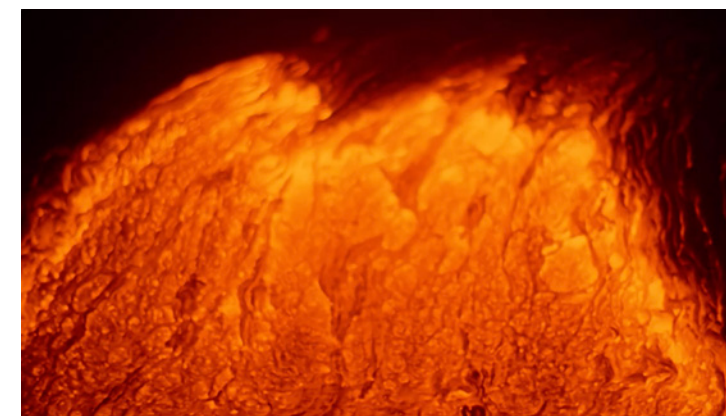
Rock Bottom Riser presents its medley of scenes by taking us to the heights of mount Mauna Kea where the controversial cosmic observatories resemble giant domed robots brooding on the crags; an actor does a street performance relating to Hawaiian history; a short lecture on Oumuamua (Hawaiian for "scout") the interstellar object journeying through the solar system takes place before a white board; some folks at a smoke shop show off their smoke ring blowing mastery; the camera looks down the remnants of a road blocked by freshly hardened gray volcanic rock.

There are occasions of deadpan humor, as when a poetry appreciation class listens to Simon & Garfunkel's "I am a Rock"—the relation of the lyrics to the film's subject (" . . . I am an island") comes across like a ham-fisted joke; or when the film's titular theme of "rocks" brings us to a moment when Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is spotted on the evening news, voicing his support for the protests over the observatories at Mauna Kea.

One of the more fascinating of the film's episodes comes with a voice speaking about Polynesian navigation while we see a model of a traditional double-hulled sailing craft, surrounded by a ring of stones: "Right after [I attended] high school they launched the Hokule'a. . . But I really didn't start getting—learning about navigation until 1980. I was just a crewmember from the second leg from Hawaii to Tahiti. And on the way down I got real curious about what was going on, and so [I] asked a lot of good questions. And the navigator on board at that time, Nainoa Thomson said, 'Well, I know that what I'm doing is totally experimental but I figure that I need to start to train someone else, you know, to assist me.' I was invited to sail back from Tahiti to Hawaii, so that kind of began my journey."

As individual sequences supplant one another, the film's array of internal connections become discernible: Traditional star-based navigation and the space-age Mauna Kea star-gazing complex; the dudes and their undulating smoke rings echoing the smoky billowing of underwater volcanic clouds; the orange glow of flowing lava visually rhyming with shots of an orange and yellow feathered cape moving in the breeze, as we hear a voice giving his opinion about an upcoming movie where Dwayne Johnson will play the Hawaiian king Kamehameha. What had seemed at first to be a film consisting of disconnected jumps from scene to scene eventually reveals, by way of these correspondences, a tightly constructed cinematic work.

JOEL SCHLEMOWITZ



ALL IMAGES Fern Silva, *Rock Bottom Riser* (2021), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.