

John Connelly Presents, New York, USA

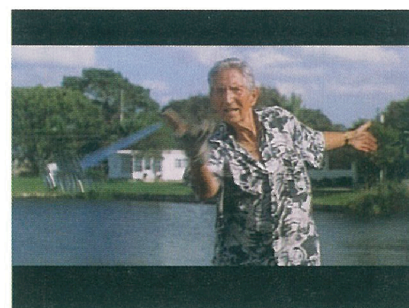
New York City has a special role: for many people around the world it is America, while for most Americans it's more a place on television or in the movies than an actual city. It's this meta-urban identity of the city that Mungo Thomson engages with intelligence and wit in his four-channel video installation *New York, New York, New York, New York* (2004). Shooting at dormant Los Angeles film studio lots, Thomson shows the vacant New York sets, their manufactured verisimilitude comic, eerie and often just plain wrong in ways that perhaps only local residents might notice and cringe at. Vintage wooden crates, the kind one never sees in present-day New York, litter these ersatz 'mean streets', along with tidy, photogenic graffiti, roofless tenements and oddly located subway stations. The ambient sound-track includes the wheeze of camera cranes, snatches of film crew chatter and, crucially, the ubiquitous and fearsome drone of helicopter blades – L.A.'s aural tag. Mostly unpeopled, these foregrounded backdrops are lifeless as even the most abandoned real buildings are not. They're literally alien versions of the city that is historically L.A.'s nemesis, made to serve the camera's needs. Whether lingering on water bottles jammed into the crotches of aspect-ratio ideal trees or the occasional appearance of a studio golf cart, or through the glimpse of palm trees just to the left of the gritty urban façades, Thomson's gimlet gaze

Mungo Thomson  
*Sword Master*  
2004  
Video still

gives the four simultaneous videos a rueful, evanescent humour. He delves beyond the surface ironies to question 'New York' as myth, cinematic construct and reality, showing the shorthand scrim of what New York has come to mean rather than what the city actually is.

Combining the artisanal with the political informs much of Thomson's work, including *Beer Bottle Bouquet* (2004), an arrangement of a dozen hand-blown brown, green and clear bottles, their mouths seamless and more smoothly rounded than the factory-produced originals. (These come from Rotterdam's Royal Leerdam Crystalfabriek, a 150-year-old glass factory that supplies carefully hand-blown objects to the Dutch royals as well as mass-producing some 100,000 Heineken bottles a day.) *Tapestry* (2005) is an enormous hand-woven Ecuadorean wool word-piece that featured long columns of political bumper stickers from the 2004 American presidential campaign, several with goofy typographical errors left in: 'Bush-Cheney '04: Support Our Trops', 'Guns Don Kill People/Guns Kill Diner' or 'Save the Environmen/Plant Bush in TX'. In both *Tapestry* and *Beer Bottle Bouquet* Thomson uses the unexpected juxtapositions of painstaking craftsmanship with populist content – bumper stickers and beer – both to champion expertise and to question how values are assigned to objects.

Down the hall from the main space, the gallery's annexe featured a 35mm loop showing Hollywood 'sword master' Bob



Anderson tossing a prop sword repeatedly and with a well-practised grace to someone out of frame. It's a re-enactment of those cinematic moments when a matinee hero – Errol Flynn in *The Sea Hawk* (1940), let's say – finds himself cornered and weaponless, only to be thrown a cutlass by an off-screen compatriot at the last moment. *Sword Master* (2004) shows us the man behind the expert throw we ordinarily don't see. Anderson sports a mane of thick silver hair and a billowing black and white patterned Hawaiian shirt, his heavy gold watch and slinky gold necklace glinting against his coppery skin. The retiree's outfit adds to his lyrical demonstration of technique, his post-toss follow-through a melancholy coda, the occasional slight smile a quiet confirmation that one or another toss met his own high professional standards. Separated by a presumably artificial pond from the trailers of a retirement community in the background, Anderson seems moated. The sword becomes an emblem of past success and a now anachronistic talent, a pointed comment on the absurdity of any form of expertise. Thomson succinctly and elegantly summons all that is admirable (the specialized adepts who made movie magic before CGI) and inevitable (the old-age encampment) about life on the fringes of show business – or in any other walk of life.

There's a sunshine bleakness to Thomson's distinctly Californian work, the quick-witted pieces imbued with the contradictions that have made that state a bell-wether for American society and culture during recent decades. In no other country do references to the cinema surface in the most serious statements and even in decisive political rhetoric – 'evil empire' and 'deep throat' being but two examples. Crazy fact and fiction blends are Hollywood's leading export, a force that helps shape the global culture. With a light touch and surgical-strike humour, Thomson slyly suggests we examine more closely our tidy 24-frames-per-second view of ourselves.

Megan Ratner



# Mungo Thomson