

## PREVIEW

## GETTING IT DONE

The American artist Kevin Jerome Everson makes films that hover between close observation and abstraction, politics and poetry

By Elena Gorfinkel

With 131 short films and nine features, the artist Kevin Jerome Everson may well be the most prolific American filmmaker working today. He is also the most aesthetically radical, not least because of his interrogation of the intertwined formations of blackness, labour and place. Everson pursues an abstraction that is forged through a work on the photorealist image, a formalism uniquely leavened with an attentive approach to the histories and presences of the African-American working-class individuals he films. Born in Mansfield, Ohio, and based in Charlottesville, where he is professor of art at UVA (University of Virginia), Everson recovers untold histories and minor figures of African-American life in the South and Midwest, in the wake of the Second Great Migration, which took millions of African Americans from the South to the North, Midwest and West between 1940 and 1970. Trained as a visual artist, seasoned in sculpture, street photography, painting and installation, he adopted filmmaking as his primary practice in 1997, using found footage,

portraiture, re-enactment, documentary, archival historiography and performance art.

Everson's cinema embraces the oblique and the opaque, avoiding the expository. He says that he makes his films for his subjects, rather than for an audience. His approach short-circuits a liberal white gaze that seeks a certain narrative of blackness's representability. His images prompt us to look differently, precisely because they do not require the spectator's participation to be complete. Everson's subjects bear an occupational intelligence; they know what they are doing far better than the spectator. In *Sound That* (2014), Cleveland Water Department workers listen for underground leaks using metal rods inserted into the pavement. What they hear, how they divine such systemic flaws, remains unknown to the viewer. In the black and white *R-15* (2017), the camera observes a labourer, wearing a respirator mask and headlight, smoothly hoisting himself from a stepladder on a blanched porch into a square aperture in the ceiling, a feat of disappearance. A cut to the darkness of the attic crawl space, and the wafting of particulate matter. R-15 fibreglass insulation is being blown, entrancing, luminescent, potentially hazardous. It hangs in the air, catching light. The play of chromatic contrasts and of light and texture in this space creates an evocation of the abstractions of light sculpture. The insulation expert departs, and a final shot shows the empty attic space with the fill

settled across the floor, conjuring a preternatural 'snow'. A spotlight from the filmmaker's camera flashes on and off. "The invisible is made visible," Everson has said; an unknown and unseen form of work is partially revealed, while the larger mystery of its craft is sustained. Likewise, *Three Quarters* (2015) and *Stone* (2013) both feature mesmeric tricks of another kind, local magicians and street hustlers performing their own sleights of hand, trading in the marvels of crafty illusion.

Everson's films investigate the expressive capacities, conditions and materialities of unseen craft or marginalised gestures. Various tasks, processes and actions are performed ritually for the camera. Corporeal movement operates at once as training, grind, and zone of contingency: a hospital worker sorts surgical implements, dancers energetically krump (*Erie*, 2010), an elderly beauty-school instructor demonstrates hair-conditioning techniques, a water-skier glides, a dam worker surveys (*The Island of St. Matthews*, 2013), football players practise scrimmage moves (*Tygers*, 2014), cowboys and cowgirls practise the art of calf-roping and lassoing for the rodeo (*Ten*

*Everson frequently describes reality as 'a formal device' – he uses it as a sculptural material to be moulded and carved*



Nostalgia for the sleight: one of the magicians captured in *Three Quarters* (2015)

STILLS COPYRIGHT © COURTESY THE ARTIST. TRILOBITE ARTS/DAC. PICTURE PALACE PICTURES

*Five in the Grass*, 2012). Sport and toil, leisure and ceremony, all elaborate a poetics of performance.

Enlarging this preoccupation with performance and labour, Everson has explored the capacities of extended duration in a more purely observational mode. His eight-hour *Park Lanes* (2015) takes place over the course of a working day in a factory that assembles parts for bowling alleys. *Tonsler Park* (2017) pointedly observes workers at a polling station in Charlottesville, Virginia, on the day of the 2016 US presidential election.

Their formal predecessor is *Quality Control* (2011), organised in seven 11-minute takes, each the duration of a 16mm film reel. Everson scrutinises different jobs in a dry-cleaning plant in Pritchard, Alabama, among them shirt-steaming, ironing, pants-pressing and sewing. Even when keeping the camera relatively still, Everson rarely uses a stationary set-up, giving his films buoyancy and mobility. We hear small talk, joking, music playing, singing, as well as the humming of the gears of the workplace itself. The automated system of moving tracks proffers a ceaseless stream of work shirts, animating the visual space of the composition, drawing our attention outward from the methodical tasks of the workers at their stations, to the larger temporal, social and mechanical architecture within which they labour. Shades of Ozu's drying laundry and Chaplin's flummoxed factory worker overlap with more specific questions and trajectories about service economies in the contemporary South. Each item requires different treatment, dirt exposed in details unseen by us. Watching the pose of the middle-aged woman who works as laundry sorter, one can recognise the pull of gravity and the weight of fatigue in the repetition of her nimble gestures. Everson asks through these images how the black body is shaped by its endurance of and through the continuing grind. That sense of ongoingness is formalised as loop: the opening and closing images of the film secure a full circle, as a line of approaching shirts, moving on the track towards the camera lens, obstructs its view.

Everson's mode is routinely mistaken for straightforward documentary. Rather, Everson frequently describes reality as "a formal device" – he uses it as a sculptural material to be moulded and carved, a means to tarry between historical time and the curve or heft of a poetic time that is imagined as much as lived. Allying his art's work with that of his subjects, Everson asserts his diegetic world as decidedly made, scripted, choreographed, framed. This impulse to shape dynamically intersects with powerful personal and archival histories. One of Everson's most haunting recent works, *Ears, Nose and Throat* (2016), assembles the testimony of Shadeena Brooks, a Mansfield resident who in 2010 witnessed the murder of Everson's son, DeCarrio Antwan Couley, and testified in the subsequent trial. Against a grainy night-time suburban intersection and glaring street lights, sharp electronic tones are heard. We observe Brooks being examined by the doctor of the title. He diagnoses a weakened vocal cord, which causes her voice to wear down and grow hoarse by evening. Brooks is then seen framed through the



Brightness, falls: at Niagara Falls in *Erie* (2010)

window of the listening booth, as if on a witness stand, raising her right and left hands, as her hearing is tested. On the soundtrack, she carefully describes the events that led to the shooting and death of Couley. The lack of synchronisation between sound and image produces an effect of diffusion. In the gesture of the raised hand, testing and testimony are doubled. Yet audition and witnessing are not equivalent, even if both interrogate her capacity to hear, to remember, to speak. Brooks's presence traces a violent trauma and an ineradicable memory, threatened with being lost in her voice's exhaustion. *Ears, Nose and Throat* shuttles between the specificity of a private narrative of pain and mourning, and summons a more generalisable, collective experience brutally common in America, the senseless extinguishing of black lives through gun violence. In the final segment the return of the testing beeps – heard earlier accompanying images of the street where the murder occurred – inscribes the film with belatedness; their wraithlike tones mark the pulse and rhythm of an embodied loss.

The sonic, the auditory, the oral, all serve very specific aims in Everson's oeuvre, and he often diversely stages scenes of listening, contemplation, concentration, thinking and witnessing. In *Eason* (2016), basketball players at



Kevin Jerome Everson

Livingstone College, North Carolina, are framed in medium close-up during halftime, while on the soundtrack we hear a rousing, sermon-like talk by coach James Stinson. The speech moves to the 'game of life', invoking the limited chances given African Americans; his call to action demands tribute to the dead, on behalf of those whose chances have been terminated. Students also listen to the words of the scholar Vivian Gordon, UVA's director of black studies from 1975-80, re-enacted by Erin Stewart in *Sugarcoated Arsenic* (2013, co-directed with historian Claudrena N. Harold, Everson's colleague). The original archival recording of the speech in Gordon's own voice is replayed later over reconstructed images of the students, mobilised, marching through campus. This conception of receptivity invites pause and bids us to listen, enacting an attentiveness and generosity in relation to the image, its oblique yet moving histories.

To watch Everson's films is to see cinema's codes and histories recalibrated. Concrete and oneiric, beguiling in their slowness and quietness, in the luminosity of their materiality – his images invite attunement, a disposition of momentary grace. The last take of *Erie* provides a surfeit of the unexpected, ordinary yet joyous form made so plentiful in Everson's films. On an expedition to Niagara Falls in a bobbing tour boat, the camera is held by Everson in mid-closeup, as the Falls roll and rush off screen. Young women look outwards from the edge of the boat, their plastic see-through ponchos ruffling, inflating, shaking in the wind. The spray of the water accumulates in beads on the camera lens; a young woman and her family express awe and exuberance at the sight of the unseen. "This is crazy!" they laugh, clear ponchos filling with water and wind. The lens is subsumed by the crystalline droplets of the splashing spray, floating through a euphoric liquid turbulence. One of countless gifts of Everson's generous, capacious art. 📍

**i** *The Island of St. Matthews* screens at Tate Modern, London, on 8 September, followed by the film season 'Kevin Jerome Everson: So I Can Get Them Told', 29 September-01 October. *Tonsler Park* screens at the BFI London Film Festival on 5 October