

William E. Jones

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Left: **William E. Jones**, *Youngstown / Steel Town*, 2008, still from a two channel installation, 6 minutes, 15 seconds. Right: **William E. Jones**, *Contraband*, 2010, still from a looped sequence of digital files, 3 minutes, 59 seconds.

William E. Jones is one of Los Angeles's leading independent filmmakers whose films often circulate in the context of museum and gallery exhibitions. From February 2 to 5, the Österreichisches Filmmuseum in Vienna will host the first retrospective of his film works in continental Europe. On the occasion, Jones discusses the recent shift in his approach to his practice as well as the expectations that viewers have from one viewing situation to the next.

AFTER I FINISHED *IS IT REALLY SO STRANGE?* IN 2004, it became difficult for me to make another long film. I was left with the question of how to continue a body of work under adverse circumstances, since the conditions of funding and the technological possibilities for independent filmmaking have changed radically over the past twenty years. Experimental filmmakers of previous generations have found ways to cope, ensconcing themselves in academia, or becoming technical fetishists, repairing cameras and going on eBay to find 16-mm projector parts. That is not my situation. I thought it was more important to do things that were in keeping with my interests rather than rigidly adhering to an arbitrary form like the feature length film.

I began to adopt a practice more like that of an artist than that of a filmmaker. An independent filmmaker puts everything into a project that can take years to realize. Every thought, every feeling, every bit of money goes into one movie, and if that movie is a flop (as it often is), financial and emotional devastation follow. It is a very difficult way to live one's life. My first two films each

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took approximately six years to make, and I was lucky. The films were screened, they were released on video, and I was able to make more of them, but I got tired of the protracted struggles. I have come to prefer the way many painters work, making several pieces at once, switching from one to another, and ultimately producing a number of discrete works.

Becoming more prolific and being less attached to any one work has been liberating. If someone doesn't like a particular movie of mine, it doesn't matter much; there are plenty of others to see. For me, it is most important to continue making work and to be part of a discussion—to be present in the world. I think artists are a bit better at doing this than filmmakers are. Even highly successful feature filmmakers go silent for a while.

Those who make theatrical films have the privilege of getting the undivided attention of a group of people for a certain amount of time. Cinema spectators walk into a theater, see the same movie, and they have a common experience that allows for a discussion. This sounds old fashioned, and I suppose it is. The experience of seeing art is more in tune with contemporary society as a whole, where distraction is the rule. Most art spectators wander in and out of galleries looking at moving-image works in a casual way.

At first I considered this distracted attention nothing but a problem, but then I came to understand that a different context provides me with an opportunity to make another kind of work. A long film produced with an economy of means must have a sustained argument, narrative, or visual strategy to lend it coherence. An artist can produce a work that has an extreme and concentrated visual impact, almost like an abstract painting, and this possibility is entirely appropriate to the cinema. Many of the first films projected in public offered brief views of subjects that were thrilling and sublime, like Niagara Falls, or in the earliest instance, a train arriving at La Ciotat station. Independent films have neglected the cinema's genius for providing cheap thrills, but big budget films certainly haven't. Critics ridicule movies that consist of almost nothing but explosions, but they fulfill an enduring need in spectators. From the very beginning of cinema, that's what movies have been, explosions! So I am making my own explosions, in another context.