

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Michael Wilson, "Cyprien Gaillard at Gladstone Gallery," *Artforum*, Summer 2018

ARTFORUM

Cyprien Gaillard

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"I was born a lo-ser." Whether indicative of a profound lack of self-esteem or of an unflinching fatalism, this wrenching declaration loops throughout the first three acts of Cyprien Gaillard's 3-D film *Nightlife*, which made its American debut at Gladstone Gallery this spring. (It was first released in Europe in 2015.) Sampled from Alton Ellis's 1969 rocksteady single "Blackman's Word," which itself sampled the line from Derrick Harriott's 1967 track "The Loser," the keening vocal is immersed in a fuzzy dub pulse that makes for a suitably hypnotic accompaniment to the film's oneiric visuals. In this context, the words are as much a texture as they are the expression of an idea (an idea that becomes complicated in Ellis's later version of the track, in which "loser" becomes "winner").

Nightlife is a nocturnal journey through three cities—Cleveland, Los Angeles, and Berlin, though the locations aren't explicitly signaled in the work itself. The film connects a number of historical monuments and references but finally occupies a curious, almost otherworldly space. It opens with footage of undulating foliage and a slow reveal of Rodin's *The Thinker*, 1880–81 (specifically, the cast that was damaged in a bombing by the Weather Underground in 1970, and that now sits outside the Cleveland Museum of Art). The scene then shifts to Los Angeles, which appears to be the site of a wild dance party to which



Cyprien Gaillard,
Nightlife, 2015,
3-D HD video, color,
sound, 14 minutes
56 seconds.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

only outdoor plants are invited. The vegetation whips and writhes in an unnervingly human way that recalls puppetry or animation, but there's no visible indication of the source of its movement.

The film's third chapter takes place at the Olympiastadion, site of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, now an event space and sports venue. Starting from ground level, the camera ascends into the midst of the explosions and smoke of a fireworks display. The occasion for this festivity is the Pyronale, a pyrotechnics contest, and the performance offers all the glittering spectacle and militaristic resonance of a Fourth of July blowout. The concluding segment was filmed at Cleveland's James Ford Rhodes High School, where Jesse Owens planted one of four oak saplings awarded to him by Hitler at the '36 Olympics. We observe the tree from above as a helicopter circles and illuminates it.

What links *Nightlife*'s four parts beyond their quasi-psychedelic visual treatment? The after-dark settings render the segues between locations close to seamless, but the subjects themselves seem outwardly disparate. There are intriguing conversations going on, though: between culture and nature in the images of LA's urban flora and Owens's tree; and between thought (philosophical and political) and action (sport) in the footage of Rodin's sculpture and the stadium's fireworks display. It also feels significant that the plants in the LA sequence are mostly imported Hollywood junipers, the artist's suggestion being, perhaps, that wherever or whenever we find ourselves, we are always in some sense outsiders, strangers in the cultural night.

By immersing us in this wandering, waking dream—partly through the 3-D projection, partly through the woozy score—Gaillard binds us to his imagery while emphasizing its transience. In the end, the gyrating plants seem about to uproot themselves and abandon their urban setting once and for all, while the Rodin and the Olympiastadion represent not only their present functions and contexts but, more importantly, the various societal and political changes that buffeted them through the twentieth century. As per the artist's vision, cities become forums for the continuous, tempestuous reimagining of both human and natural histories. Are there really winners and losers here, or is the distinction moot? No player, it seems, is greater than the game itself.

—Michael Wilson