

frieze

Margaret Salmon

STORE

John Steinbeck's novel *The Moon is Down* (1942) is a peculiar piece of anti-Nazi propaganda – peculiar, because it does not make use of exaggerated antagonisms such as good versus evil or villains versus heroes. The novel is a portrait of the invasion of a small village where the occupiers are cruelly suppressing the population. The invading soldiers and the peaceful villagers alike are burdened by the decisions their position forces on them. In her notes to the exhibition 'The Moon is Down' Margaret Salmon writes about the balance between the specifics and the larger story in Steinbeck's novel. Salmon adopts the author's subtle way of talking about the individual caught in his or her ascribed role and about their relation to society. The artist exhibited two recent works: *Gun Trilogy* (2008), shown at Art Basel earlier this year, and *Fireman* (2008), exhibited here for the first time. In their representation of male stereotypes the works seem like the counterpart to Salmon's film *Ninna Nanna* (2007), which explores the theme of motherhood.

Gun Trilogy – the larger work in the show – consists of a three-part digital projection transferred from 16mm black and white film. The size of the installation is intimate, and the seemingly free floating screens hold three equally sized images – stacked one above the other – whose scale is more reminiscent of a television than of a cinematic experience. Three men are depicted: a policeman on a shooting range and indoors with a punching bag; an elderly soldier going about activities in his home such as cleaning shoes, reading the paper and dancing with a woman; and a rifle-carrying hunter in fatigues lingering in a snow-covered forest. *Gun Trilogy* fits within Salmon's body of work in the way it focuses on the everyday and the domestic. Its lyrical imagery is accompanied by voice-overs of the three men speaking about their respective roles. Three sometimes overlapping voices create parallel, patchy narratives. Images and sound occasionally meet – the policeman, for example, talks about the chase and subsequent arrest of a young man, and this is exactly what is shown on the screen – but predominantly they run separately. The partial discrepancy between image

About this review

Published on 01/11/08

By Bettina Brunner



Margaret Salmon, *Fireman* (film still, 2008)

[Back to the main site](#)

OFFICE BAROQUE

and sound is reminiscent of Salmon's work *PS* (2002), in which footage of a man working in his garden is accompanied by the sound of an arguing couple.

In *Gun Trilogy* the representation of the soldier's domestic actions has the quality of a nostalgic, rather melancholic home movie, yet his story is the most disturbing. Talking about his experiences in the Vietnam War, which included an encounter with a little girl holding a hand grenade, he tells us about his decision to kill her. There is a grim logic in his words when he says that she was going to die anyway and that the question was whether or not she would take him with her. Michel Foucault, who noted how wrong it is to believe there can be no violence in a world of reason, springs to mind here. In faded black and white the soldier looks like the counterpart to Salmon's *Peggy*, a film from 2003 in which the protagonist, an elderly woman, is shown going about her domestic chores singing 'Amazing Grace'. Salmon films the soldier lying in bed, haunted by events he cannot change. The artist says she wanted to look at a specific condition of life but also hoped to go beyond the personalities depicted. She portrays the three characters in *Gun Trilogy* as individuals yet juxtaposes them in respective, clear-cut roles: policeman, hunter, soldier. Although each of them represents a stereotypically male position, the policeman and the soldier are also manifestations of the ambivalence of state power, swinging between control and protection. They all have a complex relationship to violence, as they have to make use of it in order to fulfil their roles. *Gun Trilogy* shows us the fragility of the relationship between the individual and society. The beauty of the black and white images and the speech of the protagonists allow us to reconsider the stereotypes and understand each character as a complex individual.

Fireman was presented on a small monitor. Shot in brightly coloured 16mm Ektachrome film without sound, it recreates the nostalgia of amateur films from previous decades. Over the course of approximately four minutes we are given a snapshot of a fireman's daily routine. He puts on his gear, gets into the fire engine, and we see him disappearing into the thick smoke of a burning building, from which he re-emerges. As in *Gun Trilogy*, it is the ordinariness of his actions that determines the work and the fireman represents another male stereotype. (Since 9/11 he has become the archetypal image of an urban hero.) The silence and nostalgic colouring of the film, however, make it more difficult to penetrate the surface of the images. *Fireman* may not have the depth of *Gun Trilogy*, but in response to the dangerous instrumentalization of certain types of individuals in order to support post-9/11 politics, Salmon's view of the everyday seems relevant.

Bettina Brunner