

SHANNON OKSANEN

SUMMERLAND

NOVEMBER 21, 2008 TO JANUARY 18, 2009

The evocation of an era and its stylistic definition requires a unique form of emotional calculation. In *Summerland*, Shannon Oksanen's remake of the waterskiing scene from the 1965 film *Viva Las Vegas*, the artist puts forward a compilation of visual estimations that combine to represent a period in America just at a point when a notable shift in consciousness was occurring. The movie's story is a typical romance: Lucky Jackson (Elvis Presley), a gifted race car driver, falls in love with Rusty Martin (Ann Margaret), a swimming teacher. Rusty wants little to do with Lucky because she is looking for a wealthy, educated man. Lucky is persistent, winning Rusty over—surprisingly not by singing and dancing, but in a daylong date, where he takes her flying, scooter riding and waterskiing. *Summerland* is inspired by this dating scene but captures a general feel of this particular time in American pop culture.

Oksanen's film is formatted to Hollywood standard Cinemascope with technichrome-like saturated colours. Two water-skiers, a buff, young, blonde male and a tall, slender, dark-haired woman, ski together on calm waters under a crystal blue sky. Both are wearing vintage styled swimsuits, his are short baby blue trunks and hers a cherry red one-piece with a faux belt stitched in white. They ski on vintage wooden skies, and are pulled by a pristine 1965 Glastron speed boat. Her hair is partly tied back, but still loose enough for the wind to flow through it. Water lightly splashes over the skiers, keeping them cool under the hot sun. Every now and then they glance at each other, smiling. *Summerland* carries a seed of romance, but it is leveled to backdrop. The aesthetic charge is equally as important as the relationship between the two skiers, the energy between them relating as much to waterskiing and the beauty of the scene as it does to romance and the general depiction of a period.

This back and forth between form and narrative is visible in two of Oksanen's earlier films: *Spins* from 2001 and *Vanishing Point* made a year later in collaboration with Vancouver photographer and musician Scott Livingstone. In *Spins* a static camera captures a young girl skillfully skating across a frozen mountain lake. Oksanen's repetition of subject matter or action as formal play is a form of rote learning, but one that is focused as much on the maker as it is on the viewer.

The repeated action of the skater's spinning jumps relates as much to the general quality of the black and white film as it does to the skater's skill. Figure-skating represents a skill, but in *Spins* it also reflects the past. *Vanishing Point* is a stylized remake of a scene from the 1971 road movie of the same name directed by Richard C. Sarafian. Oksanen and Livingstone's laconic film is counter to the fast paced original, which bore the tagline, "it's the maximum trip... at maximum speed." The filmic quality of *Vanishing Point* is so different from the original, yet it leaves a familiar flavour in one's mouth, like knowing a taste without actually having experienced it.

Oksanen has an interest in repeatedly representing already over represented images. She is well known for her serial portraits of popular and historical figures. Her forty ink on paper drawings of Nana Mouskouri, one of the world's biggest selling female singers, were her first serial portraits and her first attempts to look closely at how the image of one figure can define a time and a general mind set. This materializing of an era and its thought is most obviously present in her ink drawings of French Existentialist writers. Oksanen reproduces images of Simone De Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre as a way of describing them, representing them at a time when they were defining new thought and influencing each other. But she also uses their images to capture the ideals of an era as it is being defined.—
As part of the exhibition *Summerland*, Oksanen has embarked on a new serial portrait. This time it is of one of the most represented figures of twentieth century pop culture, Elvis Presley. Her source material is collected from widespread media photographs. For this series she is working with oil paint on linen, which offers a softness that isn't present in her earlier drawings or paintings. This soft edge creates an almost perfect ground for nostalgic idealization. The image of Elvis becomes not just the symbol of the pop star but also a signal for a perfect "then" in the not so good "now." Each separate glossy oil painting of The King is an instance of present white-washed desires, which surface as Oksanen's paintings of Elvis accumulate. It is not that she has used anything other than the most flattering pictures of Elvis as her source material, but in her repeated representation of the icon the fantasy dissolves. Even the soft edges of the oil

paintings create a rift that breaks the dream of this superstar. This rift is caused by the small variations between our Vaseline coated memories of the original images and the beautiful but deliberately imperfect recreations by Oksanen. _____

Reproduction and repetition cause small changes to occur over time, and it is the registration of these variations that takes Oksanen's work beyond the realm of nostalgia. Not that its effects are inconsequential to the artist: nostalgia is a useful condition. To be able to induce a nostalgic response is an incredible power and shouldn't be taken for granted. Regardless of its power and prevalence, nostalgia is still tentative. Some idealized visions may linger longer than others, but there is always a moment when they give way to present realities. In Oksanen's work this is likely to occur in the details. Her drawings and paintings are amplified details. The details are no longer about subject matter, but relate more to the form in which they are presented. Repetition functions as a means of removal of the pop cultural elements, but comes to formally characterize the end of an era. _____

In *Summerland*, there is a compiling of like images which she uses to call to mind an era, defining it stylistically. There is an evocation of the 1960s youth culture just before it is about to turn into something else. The film is set in 1965 America at a time when the Free Speech Movement was happening in Berkeley; the Watts Riots in Los Angeles killed 34 people; Vietnam war protests started, and the Houseboat talks with Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg were just around the corner. In *Summerland*, the sustained action of water-skiing is its own form of resistance. It is as if Oksanen is using this leisure sport to hold that romance and naiveté in place and time. Nostalgia resides in the realm of images, and Oksanen keeps it there. In a personal reflection of how memory functions and how society at large comes together in memory, she manages to bring forward a strength and control that can only come from making and remaking images. To

use water-skiing to represent a moment just before that mass public shift of consciousness is like knowing all too well that you can't be in the water without getting wet. _____

Jenifer Pappararo

Excerpted from "A General Feel for Summerland" in Summerland, exhibition catalogue, Contemporary Art Gallery, 2008.

BIO

Shannon Oksanen is originally from Vancouver, where she continues to reside; she studied fine arts at the University of British Columbia in 1993. Since the mid-nineties she has participated in exhibitions across Canada as well as internationally, including solo shows at VTO Gallery, London, England; Or Gallery, Vancouver; and Tracey Lawrence Gallery, Vancouver. Oksanen participated in *Baja to Vancouver* a touring exhibition of West Coast artists, coordinated by the Seattle Art Museum, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Wattis Art Institute (2003). She has participated in group exhibitions at Kelowna Art Gallery, (2003); Passogen Gallery, Linköping, Sweden (2004); Gallery 303, New York (2005); and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2007). Her work is included in publications such as *Read, Ed 1* (Artist Portfolios), Emily Carr Institute Press, Vancouver (2007); *Soundtracks*, exhibition catalogue, Edmonton Art Gallery, (2005); *Break Away!*, exhibition catalogue, Kelowna Art Gallery, (2004); and *Baja to Vancouver*, exhibition catalogue, Vancouver Art Gallery, (2003). Reviews of her work have appeared in the online magazine, *Akimblog* (May 2007); *Artforum*, New York (January 2005); and *Globe and Mail*, Toronto (August 2001). Oksanen is represented by Lawrence Eng Gallery, Vancouver.

ARTIST TALK

Thursday, December 4, 7pm at Contemporary Art Gallery
Co-hosted by the Contemporary Art Society of Vancouver

This exhibition is sponsored by the Audain Foundation.

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– BC's original winery and proud supporter of BC artists.

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