

CRITICS' PICKS: LONDON, RODEO: LESLIE THORNTON, CUT FROM LIQUID TO SNAKE

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“Have you really thought about the question, What is thought?” philosophizes a bearded man in Leslie Thornton’s twenty-six-minute film *Cut from Liquid to Snake*, 2018. His face is oddly cramped against the camera; perhaps we’re witnessing bedtime banter. Complicating matters, Thornton has fragmented the footage into multiple reflections that jumble into a kaleidoscope, an effect she repeats throughout the film. A woman’s voice replies with a non sequitur: “The Boson is the particle, and the Higgs is the field. . . .” He interrupts: “They’re just names.” Thornton’s grainy, near-monochrome video of ants moving, girls on a train, and fish swimming upstream blurs in and out of abstraction, while the soundtrack—a proliferation of female voices, cricket chirps, audio glitches, and harp—offers only moments of comprehensibility. It is as if we were witnessing the human brain at work, struggling to pattern experience into meaning.

But there is a deeper anxiety in the film that hovers elsewhere, on the frightening cliff edge of no—or too much—meaning. It is glimpsed in Thornton’s footage of bubbling tar sands and heard in an archival audio clip in which an eyewitness to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima describes its effects on its victims’ bodies, whose “fingernails bent upwards, so that you could just pull them off.” Later, we watch a relative of Thornton’s describe the artist’s grandfather and father’s involvement in the Manhattan Project, how Thornton’s father signed his and his parents’ names into the atom bomb’s casing before packing it onto the plane to Japan. Framed

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by this legacy, Thornton's film dips into and out of language, kinship and separation, all the while grappling with her own implication in a history of horror that goes beyond sense.

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