

You Must Remember This

By HOLLAND COTTER AUG. 18, 2011

Kevin Jerome Everson's short films about ordinary African-American life are completely unordinary. Yet despite their frequent appearance in film festivals and on museum film programs, they have yet to sink fully into art world consciousness. Even when Mr. Everson's striking seven-minute "Emergency Needs" was in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, it was sidelined, as biennial films often are, by the objects in the galleries.

As if to make up for this, the museum has organized a small solo show called "More Than That: Films by Kevin Jerome Everson," made up of 17 brief films (technically, films transferred to video) projected on four walls of a screening room. Some of the films seem to be purely archival and topical, others simply and casually anecdotal, though as one quickly learns, "pure," "simple" and "casual" are not words in Mr. Everson's aesthetic vocabulary.

The 2007 film called "According to" opens with a shot of an elderly African-American man coming out onto his front porch in Cleveland to collect the daily newspaper left at the door. He herds his dog back inside, then sits down to reminisce about how, as a youth, he too delivered papers. (Mr. Everson was born in 1965 about 80 miles from Cleveland in Mansfield, Ohio, a once-prosperous rust-belt manufacturing town that, like Cleveland, was a goal for Southern blacks during the Great Migration earlier in the 20th century.)

The film, only eight and a half minutes long, then cuts to vintage television news footage. In one segment we see a body being pulled from a lake as a newscaster's

voice reports on the accidental death by drowning of a black man. The same voice then tells us of a woman's death in a house fire, also accidental, in an African-American neighborhood, and we see what might be her figure lying among smoldering ruins.

Then both reports are repeated but with crucial changes. The drowned man, we're now informed, is suspected to have died as a result of foul play, and police aid was slow in arriving. The fire was believed to be arson; several white men were seen lurking around the house just before it started.

Finally we return to the porch but with a slight step-back in time, so we see the newspaper being delivered to the door by a little girl, who dashes away. The man emerges as before, but immediately repeats his entrance twice again, as if rehearsing under direction. He sits to talk, but when prompted to speak of the past he can only say, "I don't remember."

If Mr. Everson often presents the failure to remember the past as a problem, he also suggests that the failure to understand history when you're living in the middle of it can be an even greater one. A film called "Something Else" is made up entirely of archival material, a video clip from the early 1970s, in which a young woman who has just been crowned Miss Black Roanoke, Va., is being interviewed by a white reporter.

After the customary "how does it feel to win?" questions the reporter asks whether she would prefer to be in a racially integrated event. She drops her cheerful poise for an instant and carefully picks her way through an answer: It's not a matter of preference. Black contestants don't have a prayer of winning in "regular" pageants. Only segregated contests offer black women a chance of feeling "up," as she says with a smile. If you want to win, and she does, segregation is the only way to go.

In those real-life seconds of film a huge tangle of American social contradiction lands squarely in front of us. And we're left, heads spinning, trying to parse her conflicted feelings, guess at the feelings of the interviewer and come to terms with

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Occasionally Mr. Everson adds yet another layer of complication to his work by fabricating events that he appears to be documenting. In “American Motor Company” (2010), two workmen are in the process of putting up a billboard advertisement for “Volkswagen Ohio.” In that giant ad an African-American man wearing a Black Panther-style beret poses beside a car, accompanied by the words “There’s a bit of the cool in every bug.”

We might think: yes, the corporate marketing of radicalism, the destabilizing of potential political power with a promise of consumer power, or some such extrapolation. In reality the advertisement was entirely Mr. Everson’s invention. He designed it, commissioned its production and hired the workers to install it, all to make a five-minute film that was, as much as anything, to put a bug in the concept of coolness, no matter who’s selling it.

Coolness, in the fashion sense, isn’t Mr. Everson’s mode, though objectivity can be — bits of life served up plain, without comment. In one video two young men engage in a classical fencing match that goes on for about 10 minutes then stops abruptly. In another, “The Equestrians,” young black men ride horses on what looks like a farm or ranch. (Mr. Everson is currently completing a film about African-American cowboys and rodeo riders in the South.) And in “Old Cat” two men glide down a river on an open boat.

And glide is all they do. They don’t talk; they barely move. At first you cast around for a narrative hook, a “Huckleberry Finn” angle or some significance in the fact that one man has his leg in a cast. Then you give up on that. People are just doing what they’re doing. Who knows why? We’re just watching life, and life can be pretty boring, as all three of these videos are, taken on their own. Yet they acquire interest within the totality of Mr. Everson’s film work and within the totality of the show — organized by the Whitney curator Chrissie Iles — which keeps generating surprises. One has to do with class. In most of the films we’re clearly in a working-class world. But where are we in the fencing film or even the equestrian film? Hard to say.

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poems by Nick Flynn that is an extended meditation on the metaphysics of beekeeping from the points of view both of a blind 18th-century beekeeper and the bees themselves? In the film we're bees inside a hive as the poet, in a voice-over, describes a house so filled with honey that its walls are about to burst.

This vision is fantastic in every sense, and Mr. Everson has come up with others just as wild. One film, not on view, is about the perils of light, as described from the perspective of a moth. In the split-screen 2008 Whitney biennial film, we see, on one screen, a 1968 documentary video of Carl B. Stokes, then mayor of Cleveland, speaking to the press after an explosion of racial violence; on the other screen, a woman, an actor, repeats Stokes's impassioned words and gestures. A social tragedy becomes a call-and-response opera. Public history is theater.

So is ordinary life, as embodied in two virtually eventless films that frame and ground everything else in the show. In one, "Ninety Three," which plays more or less continuously, we see a 93-year-old man in a darkened room trying to blow out candles on a huge birthday cake and finally succeeding. In the other film, "Act One — Betty and the Candle," a young girl gazes steadily into the flame of single flickering candle for almost 12 minutes.

The two films connect various dots, personal, political, historical and fictional. The man blowing out the candle is the same man who collected a newspaper on his porch and had trouble remembering the past in "According to." He's old enough to have participated in the Great Migration. The light-gazing girl is the one, now three years older, who delivered the paper in the same film. Both are members of Mr. Everson's family. (The girl, Matilda, is his daughter.) Other family and friends appear in different pieces.

The exhibition itself is dedicated to the memory of DeCarrio Antwan Couley, Mr. Everson's son, who died in Mansfield last year. From all this remarkable work, much more is sure to emerge, driven by the same restless, probing, experimental impulse. Mr. Everson, who teaches art at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, is astoundingly prolific. He has so far produced 5 feature-length films and more than

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and out-of-the-way one. The time is not far off when he'll need an entire museum.

“More Than That: Films by Kevin Jerome Everson” remains through Sept. 18 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.

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