

Man of Letters

HENRIETTE HULDISCH ON DAVID GATTEN

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996, David Gatten, having been inspired by the work of Agnes Martin, experimented with drawing lines on film when serendipity led him to a little-known volume called *The Secret History of the Line*. An eighteenth-century text written by William Byrd II, a wealthy planter and government official in Virginia, this book (together with its companion, *The History of the Dividing Line*) is an account of the author's journeys mapping the border between Virginia, the first English colony in North America, and the newer colony of North Carolina. Byrd's life and writings became all the more interesting to the filmmaker when he learned that Byrd possessed one of the largest libraries in the colonies at the time, a collection of almost four thousand books. And so Gatten embarked on a cycle of nine films considering the relationships among language, image, experience, and representation, one of the most erudite and ambitious undertakings in recent cinema.

If drawing was the genesis of Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, *A True Account in Nine Parts* (1996–), bibliophilia has been the passion sustaining it. Books from the Byrd library and other literary sources—including William's diary as well as his daughter Evelyn's correspondence with a forbidden lover—are integrated into the four *Secret History* films the thirty-five-year-old artist has completed so far. These works have been shown at numerous venues, including the Pacific Film Archive at Berkeley and the New York Film Festival. The latest installment, *The Great Art of Knowing* (2004), will be screened in New York on March 18 and April 23 as part of the current Whitney Biennial's film and video program.

In keeping with its bibliographer-cartographer subject, the cycle originated in literature and drawing, and these fields, particularly the latter's relationship to handmade film, are the intertwined structuring devices running through the works. Using rapidly scrolling text pages, hieroglyphics, and magnified script, Gatten traces the moment when words and letters become illegible as text and visible as image. In this regard, his filmmaking owes much to the poetry of Susan Howe and e. e. cummings, as well as Eastern character-based compositions, all of which hinge not only on the meaning of words but also their arrangement on the page. Gatten mentioned in a talk last year at the New York Film

Festival that viewers often ask why he makes films and not books—a question perhaps well taken, but oblivious to his austere beautiful cinematography and masterful command of nontraditional cinematic technique.

Indeed, Gatten's palimpsestic films showcase an array of cinematic processes that constitute a parallel (if idiosyncratic and incomplete) survey of the medium's history, tracing some of its technical developments and placing them within a larger movement from text to image. *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1996–2002), which serves as a kind of preamble to the cycle, includes a section that focuses on the handmade splices forging pieces of film together. The lines disappear and turn into craggy white shapes on black that resemble a topographical map, evoking the wilderness charted in Byrd's books. Bird's-eye view and magnification thus come to define two oscillating poles of Gatten's inquiry. To make *Moxon's Mechanick Exercises, or, the Doctrine of Handy-Works Applied to the Art of Printing* (1999), the third installment, which was finished first, Gatten used a time-consuming process that involves affixing cellophane tape to book pages, removing the pulp by immersing the pages in hot water, and transferring the remaining ink directly to the filmstrip by hand. The title was taken from one of the volumes in Byrd's library, and the film revolves around the invention of Gutenberg's printing press, an element significant to the cycle in that it marked the moment when text became detached from the act of writing by hand. Whereas the first film consists entirely of text, *Moxon's Mechanick Exercises* contains a few brief shots of book pages, and *The Great Art of Knowing* expands on the use of photographic imagery with shots of feathers, dried branches, and book spines. *The Enjoyment of Reading, Lost and Found* (2001) is the first to include a brief color sequence. Future installments will have sound, as well as scenes shot with a moving camera.

Gatten's ingenious charting of cinematic technique parallels his uncovering of the Byrd family history. Over the course of the cycle, Evelyn, William's heartbroken daughter, becomes more prominent, and her forbidden and ultimately tragic romance will continue to thread through the remaining five films. Her suffering contrasts sharply with William's secret diary, an enemo-



David Gatten, *The Great Art of Knowing*, 2004, stills from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 37 minutes.

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ditional record, written in a coded script, of gentlemanly activities. One of the brief color images appearing near the end of *The Enjoyment of Reading* is the tip of a flickering candle filmed in extreme close-up—a classic symbol of waiting for a lost lover. Gatten's resurrection of Byrd's library is a subtle rehearsal of cinema's history, a history that has long been married to the idea of the undead. From spirit photography to home movies, the photographic record has always served as a means of rescuing the likenesses of loved ones from oblivion. Gatten takes a reader's pleasure in unearthing the near-forgotten archive and its buried meanings, while evincing a keen understanding of the limitations of the text. The second film in the cycle, *The Great Art of Knowing*, contains a quotation from Susan Howe that may sum up Gatten's underlying proposition for animating Byrd's library: "All words run along the margins of their secrets." □

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