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VIDEO REVIEW; The History of Peekskill, as Collage

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
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PAUL CLAY's two-channel, contemplative, philosophical video artwork, "When We Came" (2004), was commissioned by the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in honor of its arrival here in Peekskill last summer. The video, on display now at the center, tells the story of Peekskill from the dawn of human occupation thousands of years ago to the late 20th century. It takes about an hour.

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Dimly allusive, the video layers and mixes images, music, interviews, quotations and written text, much of which has also been distorted using computers. The format feels kind of right, the artist repackaging history less as a single, linear narrative than as a series of competing, overlapping stories. It is like history as music video. It also gives ordinary people a voice.

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The gathering of information and its combination in a more dynamic form is an old artistic practice we usually refer to as collage. Its chief virtue is that it can allow us to re- envision and revalue things that we take for granted, sometimes even sparking new insight and awareness. This is Mr. Clay's ambition, to make us look again at Peekskill by making it strange.

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The video begins in a kind of primeval space. Across a wavy blue screen flashes the text of an African myth explaining the origin of water, the sun and the moon. We hear the sound of dripping water, an image of water appears, and then more text tells us how a retreating glacier formed the Hudson River valley at the end of the last ice age.

The sounds of chanting, images of a riverbank and more screen text alert us that humans have arrived. They are the Paleo people, who lived here around 12,500 years ago. They were soon followed by other Indian tribes, including the Mahicans, the Iroquois and the Wappinger. The last to come were the Kitchawak, an Algonquian people who settled an area close to modern-day Peekskill.

Sounds of railway engines accompany oral descriptions of the arrival of the Europeans, and the story of the Dutchman Jan Peek, for whom the town is named. He was the first to come up the river from the colony of New Amsterdam, later renamed New York, in the late 17th century to trade with the Kitchawak at Sackhoes, the Indian name for Peekskill. It was the beginning of a new era.

The rest of the video samples and mingles images, music, text, and data from videotape, live cameras, sound recorders and computers at such a dizzying pace that it can be hard to follow the story. But at its core is the idea that the subsequent history of Peekskill is a story of people coming from elsewhere. It is a story of migration.

Among the stories told are accounts of early British settlers, African-Americans fleeing slavery in the South, and the Irish, Italian and Chinese workers who came to build the railways. We also learn that Peekskill has been a refuge for dreamers and utopians, Eastern Europeans fleeing bigotry and, more recently, struggling artists and Latino workers seeking a better life.

The video also commemorates important events in the town's history, like its significance in the underground railroad and the racism-fueled riots that erupted after Paul Robeson's historic 1949 town concert. Peekskill also was a military base for George Washington during the Revolutionary War.

But the video is not only about the past. Snippets of impromptu interviews with shop owners and residents pepper the piece. Capturing lived history and intimate details of everyday life, this footage is especially compelling. The chance to peek inside other people's homes and businesses also offers a further, voyeuristic pleasure.

The most memorable interview is with a young, illegal migrant worker. He talks openly (his identity obscured) of his fondness for the town and his desire to stay on here. He admits to having been taken advantage of by employers, but says that there is nothing but poverty waiting for him back home. It is a very moving story.

The last part of the video stresses town street life and architecture, the footage homing in on the architectural styles and details of old buildings. This imagery adds a density of thought, a clarification of purpose and powerful sense of place. Here among the living, Mr. Clay seems to be saying, is the constant presence of the past. We see what they saw when they came.

"When We Came" is at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, 1701 Main Street, Peekskill, through Feb. 14. Information: (914)788-7166 or www.hvcca.com.

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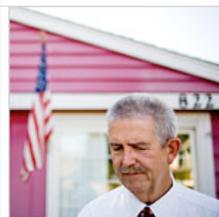


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