

Art in America

Gareth Long Puts a Spotlight on the Grift of Local Entertainment—and Dabbles in It, Too

Sean J. Patrick Carney

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Tucked away on the second floor of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum is *Kidnappers Foil* (2014), a mildly cacophonous, anachronistic video installation by Canadian conceptual artist Gareth Long. Looping on the gallery's walls and several suspended screens are eerily similar, distinctly American midcentury black-and-white amateur films. Highly compressed, these digital translations of disintegrating film cuts appear both grainy and pixelated. Each offers a hammy, provincial twist on an identical narrative: a young girl is kidnapped; her father offers a reward; local children band together to rescue her; the town celebrates her eventual liberation with an unpolished talent show.

As the short films play side by side, imperfections in the inexpertly replicated narrative grow apparent. Though the scripts are interchangeable, the scenes vary wildly in length. The versions don't end at the same time. This makes for a clunky, disorienting viewing experience. Once the longest running iteration finally fades to black, the room goes quiet, offering a welcome, but awkwardly long, two-minute breather. Then the space bursts alive again with the disorderly sounds of dozens of white children tunelessly singing "London Bridge" as flickering title cards announce "The Local Gang" starring in *Kidnappers Foil*.

The Toronto-based Long, whose iterative and appropriative artist-as-editor practice frequently involves reconfiguring existing media, did not produce these movies. They are the work of Melton Barker, a little-known itinerant filmmaker who was based in Dallas. Armed with a simple original script and a portable moviemaking studio, the hardworking and hard-drinking Barker zigzagged the heartland continuously from 1936 until his death on the road in 1977. Capitalizing on rural dreams of Hollywood glamour, Barker claimed he'd discovered Spanky McFarland of Hal Roach's popular "Our Gang" series. In small towns across Texas, Oklahoma, and beyond, Barker placed newspaper advertisements, recruiting local youth to pay a fee and audition for a part in *The Kidnappers Foil*. Children who made the cut could later see themselves on the big screen at their local movie theater—provided they purchased a ticket. Caroline Frick, a film scholar and founder of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, estimates that Barker remade *The Kidnappers Foil* hundreds of times; she has located and digitized nearly two dozen versions.

In his artist's statement, Long cites "copying, seriality, amateurism, stupidity, translation, and collaboration" as central themes of his work. Barker's frenzied filmmaking embodies all these concerns to various degrees, so it's no wonder Long was drawn to the dilettante director's obsessive, redundant opus. For his work *Don Quixote* (2006) Long used an imperfect speech recognition software program and an audiobook of Cervantes's novel read by veteran voice actor George Guidall to create a stupid new translation of the classic. He has fabricated puerile replications of Martin Kippenberger sculptures from papier-mâché. He spent five years producing sculptural interpretations of a two-seated desk from Flaubert's unfinished satire *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, about a pair of copy clerks with near-identical mindsets. When it comes to repetition, Long seems more interested in the asinine than the appreciable. Tautology is a joke, not a meditation.

Barker's serial filmmaking couldn't have been very meditative. The repetition borders on manic. There is a hilarious rumor that he openly hated children. I imagine Barker as somewhat like Kenny Powers—the notoriously volatile, has-been baseball pro played by Danny McBride on HBO's

"Eastbound & Down" (2009-13)—a delusional, self-aggrandizing, wannabe visionary brimming with contempt for the plebes and kids surrounding him. But like Powers, somehow Barker isn't an entirely unsympathetic character. *The Kidnappers Foil* sure feels like a swindle, but a relatively harmless one. It's true that nobody ever achieved stardom after appearing in one of Barker's films, despite his hinting at the contrary. But thousands of Americans in flyover states enjoyed the rare opportunity to see themselves and their community represented on the silver screen. The vertical integration business model Barker employed required making the same wonky film over and over again—only the locals who paid to participate in a given iteration would also pay to see it in the theater.

Aptly, Long's presentation is itself an iteration. The project debuted in 2014 at Kunsthalle Wien. Long intended, appropriately, to take it on the road. But the touring itinerary never materialized, so this hyper-American, itinerant community portrait ironically seemed destined to appear but once, in Europe. It is entertaining to imagine what a twenty-first-century Austrian art-viewing public thought while watching cornfed American tweens of the Silent Generation stooge their way through an "Our Gang" rip-off. But what's more enticing—and what feels mildly salacious about the exhibition at the Blaffer—is a creeping and now unshakeable feeling that Long and co-curators Max Fields and Andrew Hibbard have taken a cue from Barker's playbook, gently hustling a twenty-first-century Texas art audience with the promise of seeing the bumpkin-esque aspects of their home state's history made marvelously relevant to contemporary art. Americans love a good grift, don't we?

Historically speaking, the surviving prints of Barker's film project are fascinating vernacular documents. For one, they are extraordinary records of otherwise-lost midcentury American accents. Their utter localness is why the Texas Archive of the Moving Image collects the works. The Blaffer's website reinforces this, suggesting that in Long's presentation "individual films emerge as portals into the place of their making." This is true, to an extent. But Long's simultaneous projections muddy practically every nuance of difference between versions, save for the variant lengths of any given scene. The different geographic sites get forced into a cyclopean portal, one that's cloying and country-fried. Rural whiteness serves as a breeding ground for America's mythologies about itself. Barker's films are an acute, if unwitting, representation of that fact.

Does Long's reframing of Barker's oeuvre illuminate difference and locality, or highlight homogeneity? It's a complicated question, one entailing parallel inquiry into Barker's own motivations. Was he, as I suspect, a conniving carnie, bilking heartland yokels bit by bit with bogus claims of his networked industry pedigree? If so, I know a few "curators" he'd have gotten along with. Or, was Barker a highly productive, high-functioning working-class alcoholic who wanted desperately to be taken seriously as a professional? That sounds like half the artists I'm friends with. Regardless of my assumptions that favor the former version, we don't really know exactly how Barker saw himself, which is part of his appeal.

Maybe the conflicting possible interpretations are meant to flatter a Texas art crowd, saying that they're uniquely Texan, but not at all parochial; part of the zeitgeist, but ruggedly individual. Maybe it was a clever way to convince museum funders that a local iteration of *Kidnappers Foil* was regionally, but not too regionally, significant. Or hell, maybe everybody's in on the joke: Long, the curators, the museum, the audience—a gigantic circle-grift on a GIF-like loop. Long's *Kidnappers Foil* and Barker's story remind me that incompatible realities coexist easily in America, as if by magic. We're attracted to grifters because they tell us what we want to hear, regardless of whether or not it makes sense.