



Art Trip: Gareth Long's *Kidnappers Foil* at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston

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How do you make a viral video? First, you need a simple script or storyline – something that's easy to replicate. Second, you need a willing cohort of amateur entertainers willing to act out that storyline on camera. And third, you need a community to watch and celebrate the finished product. If you think what's being described here is a phenomenon of our contemporary media condition, the likes of which saturates YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and other online platforms, well, you're only about 80 years late to the party.

As seen in Toronto-based artist Gareth Long's exhibition *Kidnappers Foil* – on view to March 14, 2020, at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston – this formula was discovered a long time ago, namely by itinerant filmmaker Melton Barker, who travelled across small towns in the United States from 1933 to 1976 and cast Hollywood-hopeful kids in the same 15-minute film production, over and over again. After each film was screened to a local audience, he'd pack up and move on to the next town.

In Long's presentation, the artist's first solo institutional exhibition in the U.S., 21 extant films (Caroline Frick, founder of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, estimates that Barker made around 300) are projected simultaneously, falling in and out of sync in a wash of sound and moving images. "Barker made an inadvertent conceptual artwork," says the artist, whose work often "confronts ideas of copying, seriality, repetition and the arrogance of uniqueness. Like Barker before me, I fully inhabit the realm of iteration, but I put repetition in the service of the production of difference: The artwork *Kidnappers Foil* possesses a significance quite other than Barker's films of the same name, a significance generated through the acts of assembly and reframing."

What Long has assembled in Texas is a series of contradictions: All at once, it's a room full of originals and a room full of copies; one film and many; a historical archive and a work that couldn't belong more to the present moment. Existing outside of the canon, these films, similar to the TikToks of today, record ordinary accents, ambitions and acts of community – things that big-budget mainstream productions can't ever authentically capture.