

frieze

Gareth Long Revisits the Greatest Cinematic Con Job You've Never Heard Of

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A small-town youth dreams of big-city fame only to become hardened, upon arrival in Paris or Chicago, by bitter disappointment: so goes the classic Bildungsroman narrative of novels such as Honoré de Balzac's *Lost Illusions* (1837) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). In 'Kidnappers Foil', a solo exhibition by Toronto-based artist Gareth Long at Houston's Blaffer Art Museum, we find ourselves stuck in a similar loop of provincial origin stories. As the Hollywood dreams of kids from rural US communities play out across the galleries, they read as grim premonitions: the lure of escape dangles before them while the realities of capitalism slowly close in.

Five films are projected on hanging screens and four on the walls: all are versions of con artist Melton Barker's *The Kidnappers Foil* movies, which he shot between the late 1930s and the mid-1970s. Across the sparsely populated heartland of the US, Barker made door-to-door sales pitches to small-town parents. He told them he was a filmmaker in search of child actors; if they paid a fee, he would cast their offspring in a film and potentially vault them to fame. Barker stayed in each town for a week and filmed the same short movie he'd just made at his previous stop, in which two adults (one often played by Barker himself) kidnap a young girl, and a local gang of children comes to her rescue. The film ends with a party. Barker would then screen *The Kidnappers Foil* for the community, charging admission for a film boasting, as the opening credits have it, 'amateur talent' sourced from the very 'neighbourhood of this theatre'. Over 300 versions of *The Kidnappers Foil* were made; fewer than half of them survive, archived by film scholar Caroline Frick.

Barker wasn't a conceptual artist; he was a sly huckster, a shambling one-man studio peddling in Hollywood dreams. Nonetheless, by installing a sort of meta-copy of the film's many iterations, Long has drawn out the simulacral qualities of Barker's project. Screened simultaneously, the different versions sync only slightly; scenes run to different lengths. The sound is at once whispery and pitched, as children from different towns seem to compete with each other for attention. (Headphones are available if you wish to listen to just one film at a time.) The children, uniformly white, romp through small towns that reveal only the merest of distinctions: more cowboy hats here, more sidewalk bustle there. Left nameless, the towns become derealized – less actual places than a singular state of mind, in which the same dream runs on loop, scaled to the collective fantasy of the culture industry.

Although the original audience members for each film would have recognized themselves or their children in it, their pleasure in doing so was contingent on what lay beyond the silver screen: the promise of fame that might allow them to transcend provincial life and connect with a broader public. Long's installation thus hints at the contemporary platforms, from reality television to Instagram, which profit from our egoism and the cultural injunction – being beamed out of all quarters, from Silicon Valley to the art world – to participate. Today, as then, the same unoriginal script travels door-to-door, transcending geographic distinctions and feeding an insatiable celebrity culture while concentrating profit in the hands of the few. The difference now is that our world is ruled by more ominous hucksters than Melton Barker.