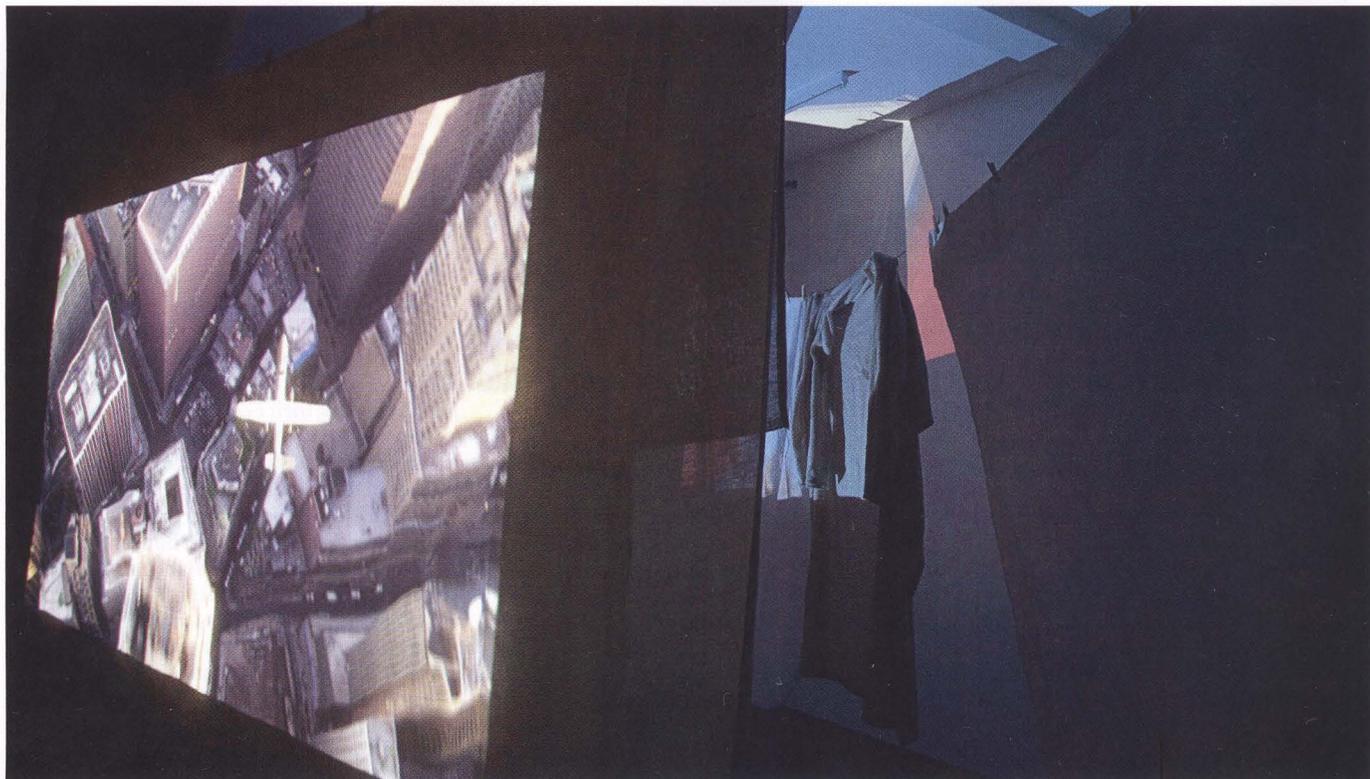


'I ADMIT I'M A BIT CREEPY...'



A bit like Thomas the Tank Engine? 'The Freestone Drone' ransacks the datastream to create an eerie collage of the visual cultures of militarised modernity

Video artist George Barber's *The Freestone Drone* offers a whimsical take on one of the new century's defining technologies

By Sukhdev Sandhu

"Altitude is the muse of enlightenment," the urban planner Thomas J. Campanella argued in *Cities from the Sky* (2001). "Elevation extends our vision, literally and figuratively. The complexity of life is reduced to utopian simplicity, a living diorama as benign as a child's train layout." Those claims have a bitterly ironic ring to them in 2013, as Barack Obama's greenlighting of the ever-more extensive use of drone planes against Middle Eastern insurgents has started to generate disquiet both internationally and at home.

The drone has become one of the defining technologies of this century: though it's also deployed by farmers, energy companies and weather searchers, it's more commonly seen as a symbol of neo-imperial biopower, America's dreams of scopic and military supremacy, Washington's endless and perhaps unwinnable War on Terror. In places like Gaza, drones are used as sonic weapons to demolish street-bound Palestinians, but mostly they're surveillance machines that – at least as much as Google Earth or the vertical thrills on offer in computer games – are redefining aerial aesthetics.

Currently showing in London, *The Freestone Drone*, a video installation by British artist George Barber, offers what appears to be an oblique, almost whimsical take on the

subject. Its title a sing-song play on Jimi Hendrix's 'Stone Free', it personifies the drone, imbuing him with sentience ("He flew, thinking and reflecting on the work," recalls a female narrator), and portraying him as both querulous ("He answered back and argued") and meditative ("What happens when I die?" he asks his controller).

This may seem a strange direction for Barber, who first came to prominence in the mid-1980s as one of the leading lights in the Scratch Video movement, whose artists – including Kim Flitcroft and Jeffrey Hinton – pirated, chopped and screwed transmissions from mainstream broadcasting, creating frenetically plunderphonic visual pieces that moved to a very different beat to their source materials.

Or perhaps not. There's been much discussion, both within academic circles and the American armed forces, of 'militainment', the convergence between drones and videogaming; the US Air Force not only hires private contractors with a background in sports-network television or reality-TV programming to collate visual data collected by drones but is increasingly looking to recruit *Call of Duty* and *Halo* aficionados as drone operators.

The Freestone Drone, like such early works of Barber's as *Yes Frank No Smoke* (1986), ransacks the datastream for images – in this case footage of Al-Qaeda suspects, a missile tumbling

The drone symbolises US power and redefines aerial aesthetics – but here it takes on a querulous and meditative personality

through aerospace, suspicious-seeming individuals turning their backs to camera – to create an eerie collage of the visual cultures of militarised modernity. This is supplemented by the director's trademark drollery and low-key wit: "I'm a bit like Thomas the Tank Engine," claims the drone (voiced by Barber in speeded-up fashion). "He was a machine that could talk and he was small and hard-working." Elsewhere, he delivers groan-inducing one-liners: "Hi, I'm the Freestone Drone. I just happened to be in the neighbourhood and thought I'd drop by."

Some viewers may wish for a film that is more formally rigorous or more explicit in its political arguments, but it's precisely the tonal incongruities – the movement between twee ("Could I ever be a nice drone? I admit I give no warning. I'm a bit creepy"), the sensual and the tragic – that makes Barber's piece so distinctive. If anything, it takes up the challenge posed by artist Jordan Crandall in his suggestion that "the doomed drone performs a more vital function than the exultant one and dislodges conventional associations."

New conceptual associations – like playing on the meaning of drone (think 'thankless labour') – are overlaid with cinematic links to the French New Wave. The film draws on Georges Delerue's richly emotional music for Godard's *Le Mépris*, uses black-and-white stills evocative of Marker's *La Jetée* and borrows *Last Year in Marienbad*'s storyline of a woman repeatedly telling a man that they've never met before. By the end, the drone-as-human conceit has stopped being absurd and has begun to feel weirdly melancholic, saturated with sadness. 

 'The Freestone Drone' is at Waterside Contemporary, London N1, until 23 March