

James Diamond
Stepping Between
Projections
by Ananya Ohri

The 2010-11 Vtape Fellowship Essays
3 essays produced in association with the
Curatorial Incubator v.8:

GOING SOLO:
unescorted dreaming

At Vtape, we're always looking for ways to celebrate video artists and the works they have created. When we awarded Allison Collins the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2010-11, we also selected 3 emerging curator/writers, Ananya Ohri, Henjreta Mece and Joshua Thorson, to receive this new Fellowship opportunity: support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice. The presence of these essays on-line marks an evolution in the functionality of the Vtape website as we make all the curatorial writing we commission and publish available not just to local visitors but to the international community of artists, curators, students and the public at large.

We extend our appreciation to the editors: Erik Martinson, artist and Vtape Submissions and Outreach Coordinator, worked with Ananya Ohri. Jean Paul Kelly, artist and Programming Director at Trinity Square Video, worked with Henrjeta Mece. Peggy Gale, independent curator and writer, worked with Joshua Thorson.



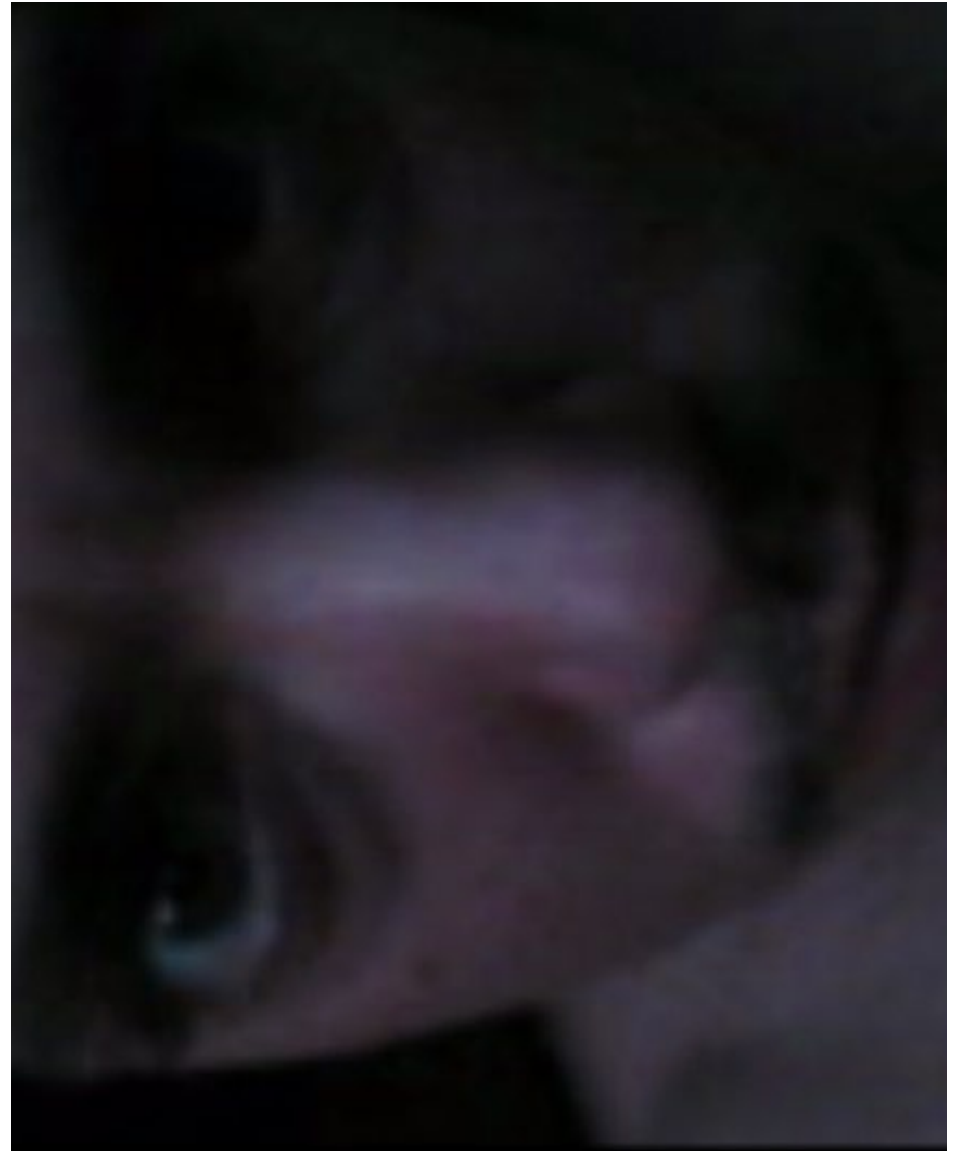
James Diamond: Stepping Between Projections

by Ananya Ohri

"I guess you wanna hear my story, or maybe you don't, but I kinda wanna tell it to you. But after I tell it to you, don't know if I'll feel better or worse, I guess it depends on your judgment, or non judgment of me..."

"The Man From Venus", from which these words are taken, features a speckled, black and white super 8 projection captured on video. We see a young James Diamond sitting on some steps at a street corner. He appears distant, dejected and noticeably restless, as his voice, laid over his image, wonders aloud the words above.

Made in 1999, "The Man From Venus" is one of Diamond's early videos. It is one of the first times Diamond allows us into his world to witness his process of making sense of his surroundings and his place within them. The concrete, material object of the body, his own body, plays a central role in all of Diamond's work. From 1999 to 2010, Diamond has produced work motivated by the corporeal experiences of pregnancy, post-partum depression, sexual dis-orientation, as well as moments of rage and reflection on realities of



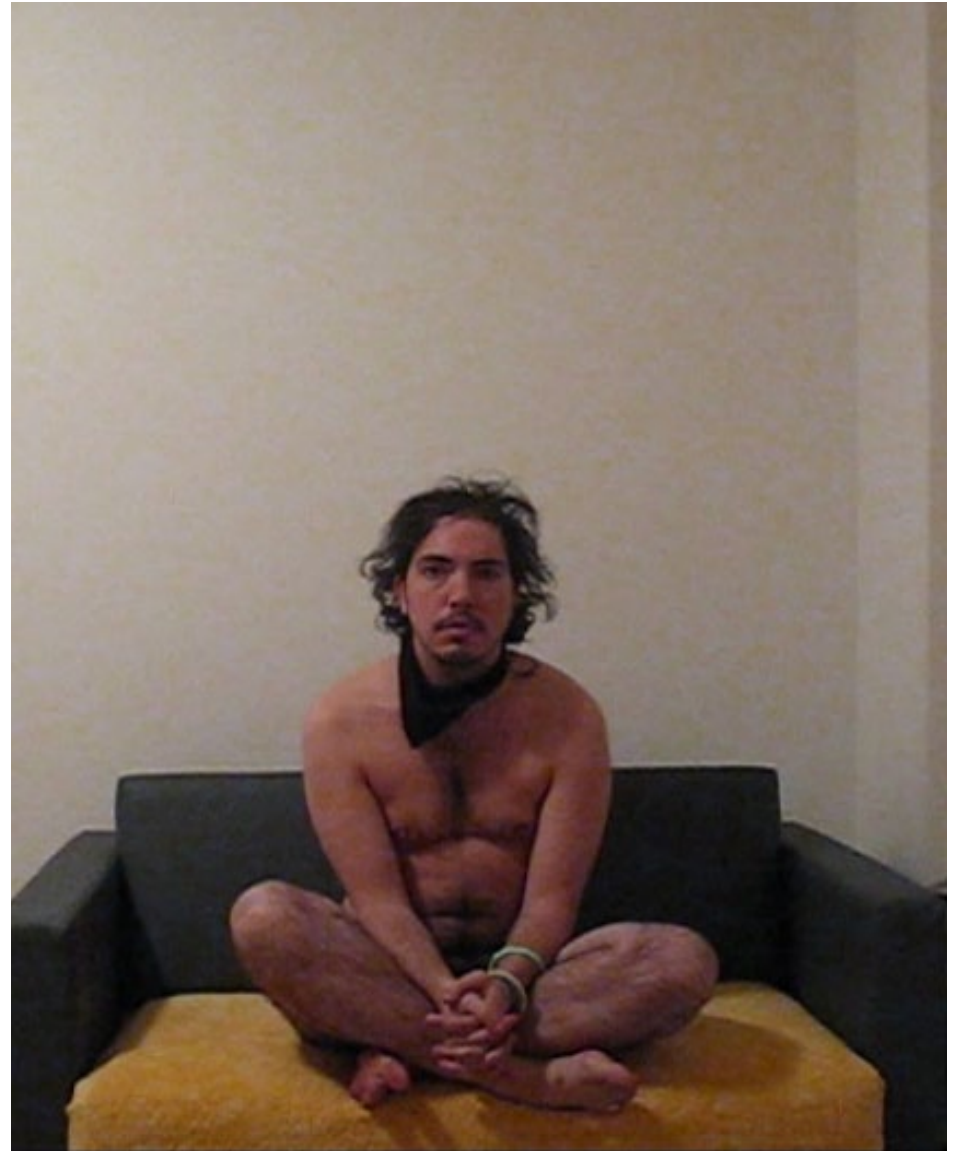
James Diamond - "I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski"



colonization and patriarchy. Self described as being of Indigenous (Cree/Metis) and Jewish descent, a trans person and a self-expressionist, Diamond does not single out any one way to be identified. He offers himself as a whole: "*mixed blood, mixed gender...mixed sex*¹." Letting us in at moments of personal reflection, Diamond's work provides a glimpse into the changes he experiences as the triumvirate of a person, an artist and a political being.

Watching Diamond's work is like being invited into a movie theatre. Images of him are projected on the screen: we see his body move through personal terrains in mostly solitary situations. Diamond, present in the room, sits in the front row, reflecting on these images. Words are pouring from his mouth, sometimes as song and sometimes in a stream of consciousness. We hear his words as the voice-over that corresponds to the images. As we sit down to watch his work of the last eleven years we discover that we are witnesses to a process of negotiation over meaning and meaning making - a process that we ourselves are not exempt from.

In "The Man From Venus" the split between the image of Diamond and his voice conveys a sense of disembodiment, an out-of-body experience. We see Diamond's body walking silently, crossing the street. He jumps a gate to find refuge behind



James Diamond - "I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski"



its tall metal bars. He is shielded from the passersby, but not from the camera's gaze. The camera follows Diamond everywhere. His body seems aimless. Youthful but limp. His words scrutinize the image, poetically conveying his confusion and malaise, but remaining, always, separate from his body. Is that really him? We wonder. The same person whose voice we hear? We are not alone to think so. Diamond, whispering his thoughts into our ear, wonders the same: *"My body, the only thing that's mine, has never ever felt that way."*²

Seven years later, in 2006, Diamond produces "Mars-Womb-Man", a sequel to "The Man From Venus". It is a reflection into the past and a simultaneous step into the future. The figurative theatre-like space in which we witness Diamond negotiate meaning makes an appearance in this piece. It is the formal manifestation of the importance of reflection and process in his work. In this piece we see Diamond sitting in a small theatre watching images from his past works. We do not see him speak, but hear his inner dialogue through a voice-over, sounding his thoughts in the familiar style of stream of consciousness. *"I love my past, for it brought me here. Here where I don't need to be alone any more, here where I respect life, in all its forms, even when I have no idea what's happening."*³



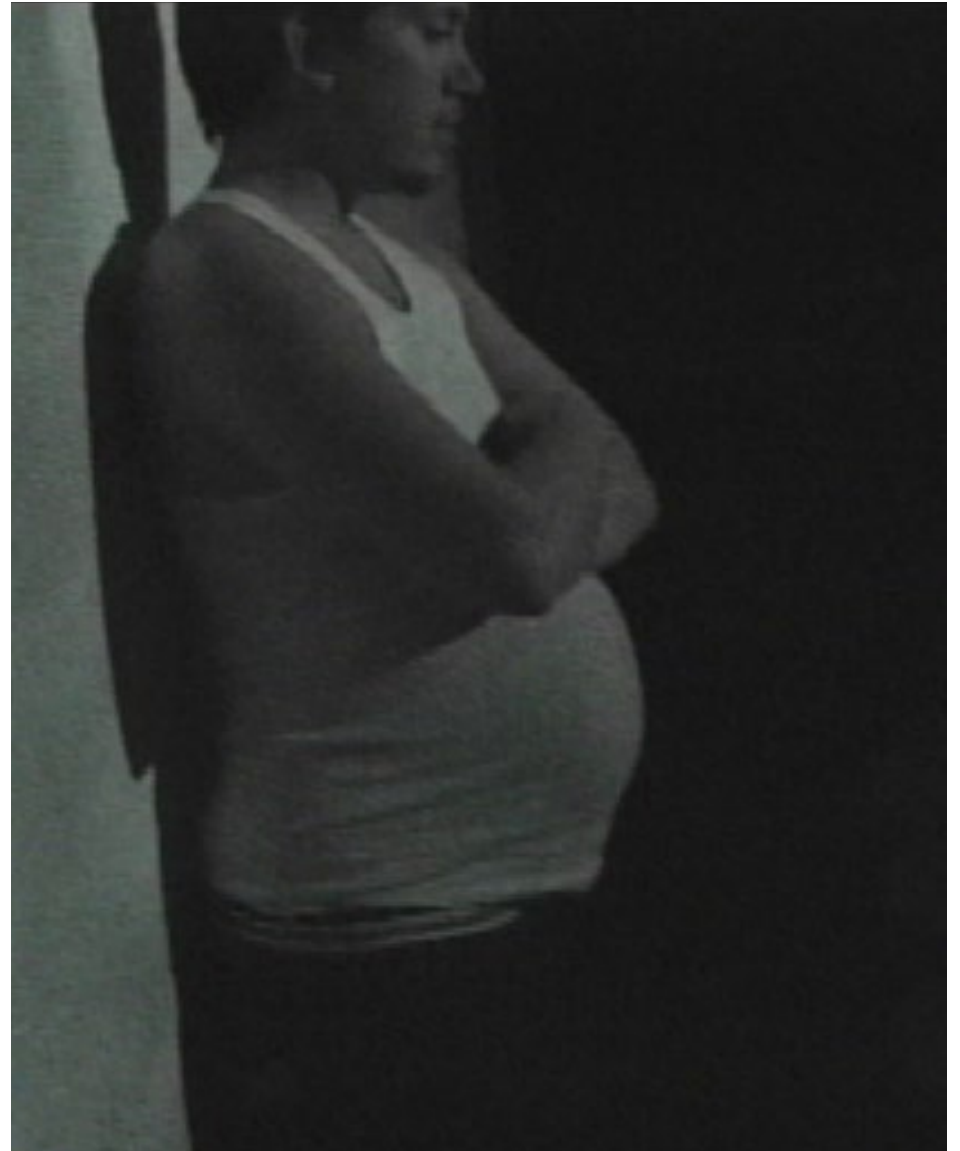
James Diamond - "The Man From Venus"



The disembodiment palpable in "The Man From Venus" gives way to the fusion of body and technology in "Mars-Womb-Man". The image of Diamond's body works in collaboration with the soundtrack to reflect on and challenge the process through which the material reality of bodies are translated into gender binaries. Diamond's body, or rather the image of his body, moves in and out of frame, and interrupts the camera's gaze as it rests upon the projected images of himself. These interruptions draw attention to the two-dimensionality of the visuals; their status as simulacra composed of electronic signal. As Diamond steps in between the projection and the wall on which his images screen, the light patterns wash over his pregnant body. At one point the projected image breaks down into video noise. The unorganized electronic signals dance on his body's surface. How should the signal be arranged in order to make sense of his material reality? *"In essence we're all male and female. They're just words anyway. You give them power."*⁴

Diamond's body interrupts its own depiction to scatter the pixels, as well as the metaphors of gender that have come to shape the visible nature of his material being.

Diamond's initial disembodied and floating consciousness anchors itself into a digital body. His image and voice form an extension of one another, what cultural theorist Dot



James Diamond - "Mars-Womb-Man"



Tuer, following Donna Haraway, identifies as a cyborg within the experimental film and video tradition. Such a cyborg is a hybrid of human and video materials. It interrupts the process where its physical and digital materiality turns into an idea,⁵ emphasizing the body's presence as a mediated subject. The visual and aural constructions of Diamond's digital body interrupt our process of reading that body. Facilitating these visual interruptions, Diamond's voice-over directs us inwards towards ourselves. "*In private and public, who are you? Are you the same? If you're naked or in clothes are you the same? Indoors, outdoors? Artist, doctor? Protector? Protectee?*"⁶ He asks the viewer to consider the material reality of one's own body, its changing conditions, and ideas to which it conforms or through which its identity is constructed. "*Life is art,*" says Diamond, "*its up to us how we interpret it*"⁷.

Elements of process, interpretation and contingency are also present in the words that Diamond chooses to describe himself and his work.

In his most recent work, "I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski" (2010), Diamond refers to himself as the "ex ex ex gay movement"; his words spark a parallel to the ideas of filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, whose work consistently crashes, trashes and pushes the need for stable identity markers⁸.

Diamond also describes his work as a reflection of his "pre post identity, until I die"⁹. His playful descriptions introduce an element of absurdity to these, otherwise loaded, identities. They reject neat and direct references, whose meanings are generally understood and agreed upon. Instead his descriptions unwind, unravel and negate neat categories or definitions, asking us to ponder the possibilities of new meanings they might hold.

"I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski" sees Diamond compelled by anger towards the phenomenon of rape metaphors and the minimization of rape. The prominence of rape-apologists surrounding the case of the film director Roman Polanski particularly draws wrath from Diamond. It is in order to subvert the desiring gazes, which read the flesh as an invitation to satiate their longing for power and control, that Diamond takes a black marker and writes the words *rape me* onto his naked body. No voice over accompanies the images in this video, and there is no reflection, projection or layering of images that takes place. Diamond appears without any further mediation, directly in front of the camera. After writing on himself he steps back to reveal his naked body. The camera does not follow the body's movements to hold it captive within the



walls of the frame. In fact, the camera does not move at all. It stands there stationary, at a fixed height as Diamond jumps in, out and around, stepping back, getting close, looking in and away. Diamond's body is not captive to anyone's gaze, or anyone's careless metaphor.

If we were to look around the figurative theatre where we have witnessed Diamond negotiate meaning with his own image, we would notice that he is no longer examining himself, but has turned around to look at us. "I am the art scene starring Woman Polanski" opens with a close-up of Diamond looking straight into the lens, his eyes piercing through the screen to look right into the eyes of those who are watching. And after his romp in front of the stationary camera, Diamond turns around, kneels and looks up. His lips utter a precise "fuck you" into the camera. The previously despondent body in "The Man from Venus", and the reflective body in "Mars-Womb-Man", appears as strong and defiant in this piece. There is no negotiation this time. Instead there is an assertion of self and its agency.

The video works Diamond has produced over the last eleven years offer a concentrated glance at his experience with reflection, negotiation and change. At the end of his last piece we are left with ourselves: with the memory of Diamond's



gaze upon us. We are left with the fissures of our own meaning making process, and the tension between our inclination to turn the material world around us, including our bodies and those of others, into symbols, and letting them be, to speak for themselves. □

Endnotes

^{1,2} Quote from voice-over in *The Man From Venus* (1999)

^{3,4,6,7} Quote from voice-over in *Mars-Womb-Man* (2006)

⁵ Dot Tuer, "Perspectives of the Body in Canadian Art", *C Magazine*. (Winter 1993): 33.

⁸ In the 1990's Bruce LaBruce produced a video series called *Mondo Toronto* where he referred to himself as "xxx gay". For LaBruce, the "x" referred to both a sense of negation, which resonates with Diamond's use of "ex", as well as a mark of "the explicit" that characterizes his body of work. (*Advocate of Fagdom*, Dir. Angeliqne Bosio. 2011).

⁹ Program notes for ENTZAUBERT Queer DIY Film Festival 2010.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

James Diamond is a director, producer, writer, and a mentor in the fields of communications and multi-media. He has directed numerous award-winning films. His film *Mars-Womb-Man* won the Best Experimental work at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in 2006. Some of the films and videos he has written, directed and produced are "The Man From Venus", "First Things First", and "I am the art scene, starring Woman Polanski" all of which have been recognized internationally. Currently, James is working as an editor whose clients include the National Museum of the American Indian - Smithsonian Institution.

Ananya Ohri is a student of Cinema and Media Studies at York University and is interested in exploring the relationship between media and community.

Ananya extends her appreciation to Erik Martinson for his editorial expertise, as well as to Vtape for providing guidance, support and the chance to participate in this curatorial fellowship.

