

Marlene Alt: *Silent Movies*

ESSAY BY ASHLEY STULL MEYERS

The first ever narrative silent film was a western. *The Great Train Robbery*, Thomas Edison's twelve-minute triumph, was a fantastical rumination on the American West. Chaos followed by placid scenery, and the charms of the old world juxtaposed with the hope of the new, were staples in the construction of a comprehensive story. It was an era wherein romanticism was closely linked to regional pride and the physical ground on which one stood. Marlene Alt's *Silent Movies*, a site specific musing of similar iconographic tropes, is a poetic detailing of the American Northwest. A digital video projection, surrounded and embraced by cast wax picture frames, acts as a dream-like reflection of nostalgic placehood. The aspirations that carry one away from that place, and the ties that lead them back, are envisioned as wind-swept landscapes as they usually appear in the fondest of recollections.

In many of her works, Alt is a staunch investigator of the conceptual gaps between home and land. The swaying of wheat, rustling of leaves and unique formation of a storm are all tactile markers of a region's character. But home, and the various intangible guidelines for the definition, are often much less concisely captured and scrutinized. In the world of contemporary makership, place can be tied to the business of art as a seamless extension of the things that make such land picturesque. Locale and the fuzzy identifiers of that locale become one and the same—and that melded identity can give birth to the most vulnerable workings of site specificity.

Miwon Kwon's *Notes on Site Specificity* gives credence to the phenomenon in ways that speak directly to Alt's *Silent Movies*. Many movements prefiguring location-specific art valued the success of an object as its strength and presence within any standalone environment. If the work changes along with its surroundings, then the maker has surrendered their hand, and perhaps the object's inherent significance, to unreliable forces. But it is makers like Marlene Alt, and works like *Silent Movies*, that upend this outdated notion.

The hypnotic patterns and rhythms of *Silent Movies* are subject to the whims of those either native to the Northwest or experiencing it from a critical distance. It isn't difficult to imagine that viewers from the Midwest or South see familiarities to their own natural landscapes. As technically unique as the images likely are, they are philosophically commonplace. They're instinctive. Alt perceives this multitude of emotional entry points as a sort of "Rorschach test". What one sees or neglects to see speaks volumes about their relationship to such landscapes, and consequently, to an antagonism with notions of home. The "movie" in *Silent Movies* emotes a psychological con. Are the rustling branches from that of an Oregon big leaf maple, or of the variety that sprouted in your childhood front yard? As many times as one engages the digital projection, it can remain difficult to distinguish.

The moving images resemble hazy memories more handedly than a detailed geographic survey or documentarian effort. The way they shift, and the subtle grain preventing complete image clarity, produce the effect of communing with a ghost. But nothing is more ghostlike than its accompanying hall of empty frames. Cast from wax, the incomplete objects exist to either be mentally filled, or stand as homage to a void. In many ways, *Silent Movies* is about a void. The images and objects each reflect a longing in their explicit embrace of the barren. As witness to empty frames and empty landscapes, one can easily develop the sense that they've been left behind. Or worse, that they have been the ones to abandon something worthy of tremendous consideration. The wax frames are selectively black, white, and grey, mirroring the video they support. Their edges are filigreed and antiqued in their rounding and curls. *Silent Movies*, now a historical touch point for the endless image churning of popular culture, are valued as such in part because they are colorless. The trope of the muted (black, white, and devoid of sound) is one deeply embedded with "the past" or the "flashback". Alt's site specific re-envisioning of Southern Oregon is a nod to the past and a moment when images were simpler—a moment when the minimal could communicate through the space it left for things intuitively understood.



Picture frames acts as the skeleton or scaffolding for snapshots that need little to no explanation. The image encased is one innately memorable for its diligent construction or beauty in spite of candor. Pictures of romance are frequently caged in glass, metals and other ornamentation—while those of familial or platonic importance are more likely found within woods or boldly squared edges. Alt's objects present an opportunity to appreciate the structure of a frame in tandem to and independently of its function. Wax is malleable. It's a material of the natural world, able to coat and protect as called for, but not completely soluble. Alt's consideration of the frame as conceptual object is also difficult to refute or dissolve. *Silent Movies* as a whole is an examination of the armatures that hold memory together. The work is as much a commentary on the shell as the substance, and Southern Oregon's grace and mystery as a locale benefits greatly from the apologues of those who have left but continue to speak of it.

Marlene Alt's work is not made under the guise of self-sufficient idealism. Her skill in site specific mediations is one geared toward recoding the preconceived markers of place. *Silent Movies* capitalizes on the silence it holds so close in name by utilizing it as vehicle for contemplation. Void of color and sound, the images and objects are appreciated for the subtleties they carry. Southern Oregon becomes the placeholder for all varieties of home, and nostalgia for native land. And "home", divorced from any notions of architecture, becomes a transient vessel to hold and animate the parts of oneself that bear habitual revisiting.