

Jordan Elliott Prosser

Assembly

Assembly is a film in the key of a dream, a regard that works obliquely—through the rear-view mirrors of slow-moving cars, windscreens and windows—to survey the city of Oshawa, 60 km east of Toronto. First home to Canada's horse-and-carriage industry, and then the nation's largest automobile plant, Oshawa's recent deindustrialization has rendered it a bedroom community, a far cry from its manufacturing heyday and baby boom. The peculiar character of this afterlife is the focus of Prosser's cinema.

Somewhere between elegy and stalking, *Assembly* shadows a suburban dream that is fading, along with the retired workers who once manned its car assembly plant. It is a liquid eye, moving through supermarkets, parks, and roads. *Assembly's* gaze seems to trail the former economic motor of the community depicted onscreen. Indeed, Prosser's film seems to register the fact that his own generation can only view such a world retrospectively, in the rear-view—a drive-by on the way to a different future.

The film contains suggestions of plot—slow moving camerawork, scenes at night, following people, moving along darkened roads, perhaps in pursuit, or haunting. Most of the views are close-ups. The camera's regard seems somewhat threatening, intruding upon and surveilling the city's past and present life. On the other hand, its portent has a reflexive affordance—conveying the anxiety of *the one who is looking*, unsettled by what is seen. Prosser's Oshawa overflows with uncanny.

At the heart of the film a historical *pater familias*, Robert Samuel McLaughlin, looms.

Last scion of a carriage- and auto-maker dynasty, his Parkwood Estate mansion occupies the town's centre, serving as an architectural benchmark and aspirational backdrop. Today it is a museum, as well as a site for wedding photographs, business hospitality, and film shoots. Whereas once Oshawa was a manufacturing town, Parkwood is its present marquee—a posthumous muse and soundstage for a televisual dream factory. At night, Prosser's camera peers through its gates, where a lone figure with a hazer spreads smoke throughout the grounds for a film scene. In the open space of interpretation, this smoke is either a veil or a screen onto which the viewer can project their desire. But the latter is easier said than done. As throughout the rest of *Assembly*, it is unclear to whom the gaze belongs.

In conversation, the artist recalls being a child in the backseat of a car, seeing Parkwood pass by. With this in mind, it is tempting to read the film as a retrospective drift—a filmic recollection of being the city's passenger. With the passage of time, Oshawa is—in some way—winding down, and Prosser has grown up. In this respect, he has gained a different perspective. This may be why there is a pronounced tension between *Assembly's* atmosphere of nostalgia, and, conversely, its intruding look. The latter would seem to indicate Prosser's mature gaze, where time has been short-circuited and the older self takes the younger self for a ride. Both conflicted selves are present in Prosser's film. On the higher symbolic plane, *both* are the ghost of Robert McLaughlin, taking in the town, looking at his once great home—the mansion, the factory campus, the metropole—from

Jordan Elliott Prosser,
Assembly, 2020.
Video still. Courtesy
of the artist.



a position of separation, stalking through it like a melancholy spirit, unable to affect its fate. Once driver, now passenger. This is where *Assembly*'s faint tone of horror and supernatural abides.¹

The tension between driver and passenger also holds between father and son, Prosser's dad standing in for McLaughlin in scenes filmed at Costco where the original automotive factory once stood. Once an executive at the corporate headquarters, we see him mostly from behind, walking the aisles of the bulk retailer, huge shelves towering overhead. Deepening the mundane reality of this visit, the end of *Assembly* features archival footage of an amusement park containing a miniature version of Oshawa, and its visitors. It is footage of relaxed people looking at their town from above—a Lilliputian situation wherein citizens play giants on the weekend. Once upon a time they stood tall, at leisure—the living dream of a postwar middle class. At around this point in the film there is an interesting cut between a fire crew in present-day Oshawa, tending a burned-out tire shop, and footage of a shiny little fire truck, pumping out water in the tiny dream town. It is not hard to decipher: Once upon a time, in another version of Oshawa, everyone was a monument, and things were so safe that even emergencies were sport. Today, people's lives have gotten smaller, even as the city has sprawled.

As the preceding comments indicate, *Assembly* is not just about Prosser, his father, McLaughlin, Oshawa, and cars. It appears to be a meditation on the slow dissolution of twenty-first-century male identity in one little corner of the world. Like Oshawa, the film displays the

flattened affect of whiteness and middle-class masculinity, which finds itself diminished rather than amplified by its intersectionality. Though haunted by past visions (of standing tall, taking the wheel, and so on), it discovers a truly gentle sadness at the point where apparently "neutral" identity (once the implicitly exclusive bearer of rights and privileges) is no longer supersized, or given a positive presence by rewards and opportunity. It is an aesthetic beyond post-industrial resentment and angry entitlement. The garage door is closed. It is the point of disassembly.

¹ In contrast to this impotency, the automotive, time-travel film *Back to the Future* (1985)—filmed pre-NAFTA and during a North American auto industry crisis triggered by Japan—provides the classic Hollywood illusion of agency via the fantastical play with the nostalgic past by literally placing a youth in the driver seat.