

## Leslie Thornton *Of Necessity I Became an Instrument*

Southfirst, Brooklyn 8 July – 25 September

In her ongoing experimental film *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984–), for which she is best known, visual and media artist Leslie Thornton makes light use of her being the daughter and granddaughter of nuclear scientists as inspiration for the work's apocalyptic narrative. Described by the artist as a life's project that has been shot and reedited intermittently for over 30 years, the film stars real-life siblings in a world devoid of people, who live in a makeshift environment where they nonetheless receive media transmissions. Thornton's exhibition at Southfirst takes a fully biographical turn. The show's title, *Of Necessity I Became an Instrument*, derives from a line in her groundbreaking 16mm short film *X-TRACTS* (1975). Made when Thornton was in her mid-twenties, this nonlinear black-and-white work shares conventions with both her structuralist film predecessors (such as Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits, with whom she studied at SUNY Buffalo) and contemporaneous feminist filmmakers, as it splices images and audio into a multimedia cutup. Her precise, mathematical editing style, along with her spinning camerawork, harkens to techniques pioneered in experimental films of the 1960s such as Michael Snow's *Back and Forth* (1969). It also foreshadows the slowly-rotating panning shots of Laura Mulvey's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), and the canny images point to the way that the female body is often fetishised,

packaged and consumed through advertising and media. This critique is laid bare in the film's introduction, in which Thornton's collaborator Desmond Horsfield counts to six – followed by six closeup frames of Thornton's own naked body. Thornton becomes an instrument here: at once subject to the male gaze but also an implement for analysing the world and its systems of power.

The core of *Of Necessity...* is formed by a digital projection of *X-TRACTS*, along with a series of films on cathode-ray monitors. These include *All Right You Guys* (1976), a rhythmic structural film tracing the perception of two women (and one woman's husband) about the women's bodies. This nontraditional 15-minute 'documentary', starring Thornton's sister and a close friend, led to Thornton's polite dismissal from MIT's graduate film programme before it was even completed. *Jennifer, Where Are You?* (1981) centres on a little girl playing with matches and smearing red lipstick across her face. The title phrase, hollered by an unseen man, is repeated throughout the video. The lush colour images echo the threatening, erotic undercurrent of Jack Goldstein's freeze-frame-like films of the late 1970s and early 80s, yet also capture the pure thrill of young girls' subversive play. The video *Minus 9* (2011) brings together archival images from the Second World War and aerial footage shot by Thornton of Manhattan, over which

she superimposes a blue disc at the screen's centre. When the viewer focuses on the blue dot, the images behind it can seem like ghostly apparitions. A voiceover, sourced from an unlabelled audiotape in the National Archive of Washington, DC, adds to the confusion: in it a Russian woman delivers her eyewitness account of the Hiroshima bombing in 1944 to the US Army. She is unable to tell the interviewers why "white people weren't affected" or whether a dark spot after the bomb flash was due to the intensity of the flash or dust in her eyes.

Alongside these works, Thornton adds ephemera related to male family members who worked on the Manhattan Project: her grandfather Jens Thornton's impressionistic paintings of the Hiroshima atomic blast (mid-1950s) and a folksy surrealist rendering of a smiling house blown into the air (1943), as well as scientific books written by her father, Gunnar. Handwritten notes from Thornton's film classes line a vitrine, above which hangs her incongruous painting, from 1999, of a budding flower. Its delicate pink form resembles a breast or zeppelin. These artefacts are unexpected, even sentimental, complicating the perception of a filmmaker heralded for her forward-thinking critique of media and her science fiction-oriented *Peggy and Fred*. The props from the film, including Peggy's tiny dress hung in a photo frame, possess this same homespun quality. *Wendy Vogel*



*Jennifer, Where Are You?*, 1981, digital transfer of the original 16mm film, 10 min 41 sec.  
Courtesy the artist and Southfirst, Brooklyn