



GOLDFINCH

A film by
Benjamin A. Owen

Benjamin A. Owen is a filmmaker whose work explores politics as it is played out in the everyday and in the commonplace. Although often working in the form of film, his practice encompasses exhibition making, performing music and working in education. Owen's process is highly collaborative, and he often works with musical performances as a form.

Goldfinch is a work that draws deeply on the artist's interest in the layman's relationship to politics, landscape, participation and performance. The film takes as its subjects an 84-year-old jazz musician named Dave Collett and a community of ladies that gather at the Carterton Women's Institute, creating a double portrait rooted in the landscapes of suburban England.

The film uses live-recorded sound to create striking juxtapositions with documentary footage, suggesting a re-imagining of political energy within these landscapes. The presence of musician Dave Collett stands in contrast to the pragmatism of the women in Carterton. A former serviceman, Dave lives alone, and despite having Parkinson's disease, when he plays music, he fully regains control of his body and his movements. Younger musicians improvise with Dave, cramming into his living room, kitchen and basement to construct a soundtrack that reframes the documentary elements of the film.

Owen's practice aims to expand the idea of cinema – creating environments where film and performance may coexist. On the occasion of the launch of *Goldfinch*, he has commissioned performers to produce a musical counterpoint in the form of a live soundtrack and installation that activates the building and accompanies the first presentation of the film.

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CHARMS

Text by
Kit Poulson

The first thing you noticed about him was the shine on his shoes, the second the shine on his nose. Ex-services definitely, attempts at casual clothing betrayed by too tight tucking, and sharp creases. Trousers a fraction shorter than others, craving boots. Life and body alternatively defined and dissolved by tides of polish and alcohol. He was tall but also bulky, and had folded himself with difficulty into a banquette.

When we spoke on the phone he had said.

“I am a big man in a check overcoat. You will spot me easily.”

For this I’m paying fifty-pounds? Still I was desperate.

Wasn’t he the one supposed to be spotting things? He sat large and self-contained, humming to himself and reading the back of a packet of seed. For a detective he seemed curiously uninterested in the world around him.

I however am keenly aware. Full of observations, full of words. Perceptive too, up to a point, self-knowledge there’s the thing. Prone to broad sweeps, shapes not details. But not suited to his kind of work, no not at all. The closer I get to things the more they lose focus. Not suited to finding things, more suited to losing them.

“Seeds?”

“For Dora, Niger seeds.”

I wanted to talk about goldfinches but disciplined myself. I had a problem and questions that needed answering. I noticed he was

wearing a bow-tie, dark green plaid. I imagined the small birds bouncing geometrically around his solid frame.

“Ah... well to business.”

I pulled a small box from my pocket and placed it in front of him, noticing that the table was scrupulously clean, free from beer spills or peanut dust.

The man was packing wet wipes?

“Hmmm nice box.”

It was nice, seeming made from some kind of turquoise lizard skin, lined with velvet, antique.

Here comes the band.

Bbbtaamfizz.

A procession of dented black cases was being ported into the pub, lifted and dodged through the narrow gaps between elbows, table corners and draped coats. What was that stuff the cases were made of? Somewhere between plastic and basket-weave, and always dusty.

He flicked open the box.

The contents were less impressive than the exterior. A ring of some indeterminate metal mounted with a large but dull stone.

“Not a diamond?”

“No.”

A couple of ladies arrived and were placing their bags around us. Not unfriendly but it was clear that they were going to be sitting in this corner, with a view of the band. More were arriving.

The detective recognised the dynamics of the situation and rose with physical awkwardness but social grace.

“Madam perhaps you would care for this seat, we can easily move elsewhere.”

“Oh that’s very kind young man.”

Young? Well comparatively.

We repositioned ourselves at a small round table. The low stools were a challenge for his large form, but one he rose to.

He lifted the ring to the light and scrutinised it, then slipped it over his little finger.

“Hmmmwealll, genuine road diamond, At first sight I would say the side window from an Audi, see the bluish tint, that’s their rain sensitive treatment.”

For a beat I was interested before remembering the implications of what he was saying. My money down the drain!

The band were gradually erecting their equipment. An unhurried purposeful business. Like people putting up a tent. Roustabouts, that's it. Or soldiers putting up a... bivouac? Was that it or was that some kind of cook out?

“Leave this with me.”

I thought he was getting up to go but instead he walked up to the impromptu stage formed from the corner of the pub, and bent his head low in conversation with the man seated at the piano. They nodded having obviously come to some agreement. He picked up an odd square guitar and began to play, laying down a circular chugging throb which reminded me of the sound of the big four engined Hercules transport planes that were a common sight low above the fields round my childhood home.

Here comes the band.

Bbbtaamfizz. Bbbtaamfizz – chug chug chug – bbbtaamfizz – chug chug chug. Diddly diddly danc dou dough.

As he played light caught on the snide stone in the ring and flashed in prisms around the room.

I watched the band shaping the song, an old standard played by old musicians. I wondered at how they could transform the place. Their collective movements building for a moment a new pub around us, a place connected to this song and all songs that people have made together, perhaps even before they began to talk. Small groups moving across the plain, building a fire. Singing a roof, a past, a future.

Nothing more happened that night, apart from the music, but he promised to call as soon as he had a lead.

He had called me and we had arranged to meet in the village hall. At the WI fete. He was standing by a stall on which were arranged a variety of tiny bags made from flowery material. They smelt of lavender.

“You got a Mojo?”

“I don't think that's what these are.”

He raised his eyebrow and handed over the money to buy a particularly garish orange and blue specimen.

“Put this on, like this. You need it.”

He pulled open his shirt to show he had a similar bag hanging around his neck.

“Now listen, sit here we need to talk...”

“We do. Why have you dragged me out here?”

“Out? This is the centre of things. Don't you see? These are my contacts.”

I was getting tetchy. I wanted some results. This was not my idea of

an investigation. Shouldn't he be pushing some mouthy crim's face against a wall whilst demanding answers in curt but sardonic phrases?

“Contacts! These people make cakes!”

“Look around, everyone here is connected, They work together, supply things. They have friends, partners, children all over the world. In some ways we are as close to Afghanistan here as we are to Exeter. And the cakes are good cakes.”

He approached another stall and handed the lady who was manning it the bag of seed I had first seen in the pub. She bent forward and whispered something in his ear.

“Come lets go. I've got the address we need.”

We set off, branching down a set of country lanes, and stopping by a muddy lay-by, which on closer inspection was an entrance to an overgrown gate fastened with bailer twine. There was a small animal transporter trailer parked up.

We were surrounded by close green hedgerows, crystallised with water drops. In the distance a group of crows mobbed a hawk.

“OK, this is the drop off. Put the ring box there, and then open the trailer.”

I placed the turquoise box on top of the fencepost he indicated. It's colour curved the world about it. Then I approached the trailer.

I could here scuffles from inside. I fumbled the bolts open and swung open the door.

A goat.

A goat dressed in fine regalia.

“Don't let him get away now!”

The goat sensed freedom and tried to push past me, but I made a grab for its halter and held on. We progressed back along the lanes, the billy goat clopping along dutifully, his coat glittering and jingling.

Nearer the village there was more and more activity. Little groups of people, instruments. Banners. Music struck-up behind me, and looking over my shoulder I was surprised to see we were at the head of a small parade. A band of girl guides marched behind us, playing a spirited version of what sounded like the Small Faces *Autumn Stone*.

The detective had taken off his overcoat and folded it over his arm. He wasn't marching though, his steps were more like a mummers strut. I feigned insouciance.

There was only one way to go, so there we went. The goat knew what he was doing.

Up the main street and past the green. Past a small stage where a group of local dignitaries, including the Mayoress, resplendent in chain of office, red cloak and tricorn hat, smiled at us. Then round the corner and into the car park behind the pub.

The procession broke up into clumps and giggles. Two men approached, one took hold of the halter, and the other shook my hand.

“Well done lad, well done.”

He had a Welsh accent.

He reached into an inside pocket and passed me an envelope.

“A token eh?”

They departed quietly, occasionally beaming down at the goat, who obviously shared their feelings. The envelope was in my hand. It felt like cash.

I opened my mouth to speak but realised I was on my own. Looking around I caught a glimpse of a check overcoat disappearing around the wall.

“Hey I want to say...”

Too far away.

Shoving the envelope in my pocket I ran after him. At each corner I reached I saw him disappear around the next. Through a gate, over a water meadow, down to the river. How did he move so quickly. I had to keep dodging around muddy hollows. But of course I was wearing my suedes.

He was by the rivers edge, where could he go? I was close now.

“Hey I just want to say...”

He seemed to be stepping into the river. Surely he was not going to try to swim across. I was momentarily distracted by a charm of goldfinches.

Chug fuzz Chug fuzz Chug fuzz Chug fuzz Chug fuzz Chug fuzz Chug fuzz.

A tiny motor boat! The kind you get on pleasure lakes, aged blue and white plastic. There he was, squeezed into the moulded plastic seat. Knees up by his ears, moving out to midstream, and picking up speed as the current carried him towards the distant sea.

I attempted to keep pace on the riverbank, but it was hopeless and after a brief time I turned back towards the village.

The fete in the stall was still open. I went in and had another cup of tea. Then I brought a strange knitted hat with a fine and odd picture of a kitten embroidered on it.

She'll like that.

WOMEN'S INSTITUTE HALL



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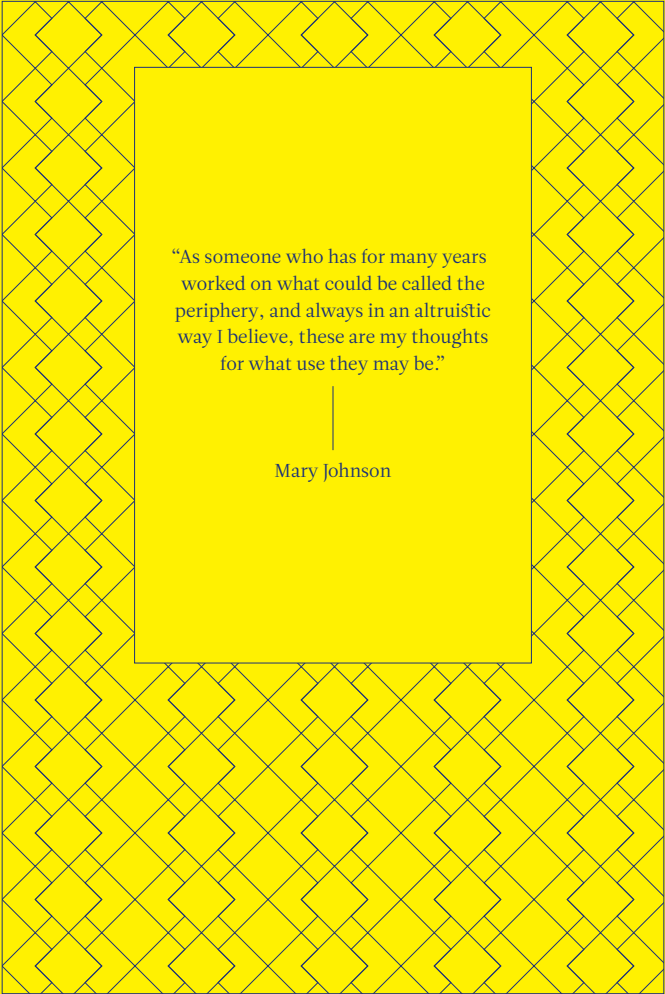
Exeter Phoenix Artists'
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Exeter Phoenix
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Stills from *Goldfinch* by
Benjamin A. Owen

Booklet design by
Des Lloyd Behari



“As someone who has for many years
worked on what could be called the
periphery, and always in an altruistic
way I believe, these are my thoughts
for what use they may be.”

—
Mary Johnson