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Tom Pnini's Cinematic Études

Pnini's films harken back to early cinema, as he compresses into five minutes what Andy Warhol dragged out for five hours.

Louis Bury, August 19, 2017



Tom Pnini, "Cloud Demo/ Manara" (2013), HD Video, 6:13 min, edition of 5 + 2 AP (all images courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace, New York)

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Over the first decade of his career, the Israeli-born artist [Tom Pnini](#) has developed a compact film oeuvre that, while varied in terms of subject matter, exhibits an unusual degree of focus in terms of its techniques and themes. Like the Lumière brothers' infamous 1895 *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, each of his dozen or so deceptively simple short films chronicles the minor drama of an object's understated progression across time. His eight-minute-long *Snow Demo* (2009), for example, depicts 10,000 Styrofoam balls, each fitted with a small parachute, as they descend from off-screen to land in the courtyard of an industrial building. Likewise, his six minute-long *Cloud Demo/ Manara* (2013) —

which follows three cloud sculptures as they ascend on a cable car up Israel's Manara cliff — records the otherwise slow and prosaic passage of time with a touch of visual whimsy.

The persistence with which Pnini has pursued variations, including films of trains and train tracks, on one of the foundational scenes in cinematic history recalls the prolonged phases of single-minded aesthetic inquiry in Robert Irwin's artistic career. In his classic 1982 biography of Irwin, *seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees*, Lawrence Weschler describes how Irwin would spend years at a time producing a small series of work focused upon one particular aesthetic question. In developing his disc installations, for example, Irwin wanted to figure out how to make the resultant object appear, to the viewer, coextensive with the gallery walls behind it. Such an approach resembles a weightlifter's isolation exercises, a method of training that focuses on one particular muscle group to the exclusion of all others.



Tom Pnini, "Fun Tom / Masarik" (2009), Video, 11:43 min, edition of 5 + 2 AP

In his career thus far, Pnini has developed a particularly strong aesthetic muscle for the representation of accretion. As in Andy Warhol's notorious experiments in cinematic duration, such as his films *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964), Pnini's films often contain no camera movement and appear to have been shot in a single take. These techniques lend themselves well to representing incremental accumulation across time. Pnini's 2009 *Fun Tom / Masarik*, for example, fixates on a seemingly ordinary public fountain whose frothy run-off unexpectedly gathers into a ringed wall of foam that resembles a children's snow fort. His 2016 *Paperweight*, which depicts an elderly writer at his desk engulfed in a torrent of shredded paper, takes the theme of accretion even further, in its sinister devolution into farce.

Pnini's films may be about the passage of time, but their uncomplicated brevity harkens back to the actuality films of early cinema rather than to the more ponderous touchstones of the durational avant-garde such as Warhol, Brakhage, and Tarkovsky. The fact that Pnini includes the word "demo" in many of his film titles indicates the sense in which they're Irwin-like investigative *études* into a particular concept or theme. Like the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose five-page stories limn worlds more

intricate than many five-hundred-page novels, Pnini compresses into five minutes what Warhol drags out for five hours. Also like Borges, and unlike Warhol, Pnini plays with artistic conceits that tend toward the fantastic and the surreal, such as his three-minute-long *Volcano Demo* (2008), which portrays a roof-wide volcano sculpture erupting atop a residential building in Tel Aviv.



Tom Pnini, "Volcano Demo" (2008), video, 2:48 min, edition of 5 + 2 AP

The probably apocryphal legend of the Lumière brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train* is that members of its first audience, overwhelmed by the impression of a life-sized train rumbling toward them, jumped screaming out of their seats. Pnini attempts to recapture some of that now-lost visual wonder by rendering the passage of cinematic time more tangible and surreal. In this respect, his most recent film, *Paperweight*, recently on view at [Lesley Heller Workspace](#), feels like a personal breakthrough, pushing key themes and techniques further than he has taken them before. Not only are the film's surrealistic accretions more over-the-top than those of its predecessors, but Pnini's decision to cast his father —the Israeli actor Avi Pnini — as the buried elderly writer gives the work a conceptual and dramatic gravitas that his earlier films sometimes lack. If Pnini is anything like Robert Irwin, such a breakthrough can't help but open out onto a new, if related, set of aesthetic questions and maybe even a new career phase.