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Turning her story into living history Matthew Buckingham's video art presents historical figures in a new light, says Morgan Falconer

Matthew Buckingham directs me to one of his favourite haunts, the Greenpoint Coffee House in Brooklyn, New York, a five-year-old café that's designed to look quaintly ancient.



Coming over to greet me, Buckingham looks like more than a local, he looks like part of the furniture — a mix of old and new. He has chunky black glasses and a youthfully wiry frame, yet a streak of white hair on his forehead makes him seem both jaunty and elderly. He has lived in New York for some years but hails from Iowa, and has something of the dusty Midwest mystery of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*.

Now in his early forties, recognition has not come fast, but suddenly he is being hailed as one of the most exciting artists and film-makers of recent times, a man championed by the English artist Tacita Dean among others. Camden Arts Centre has done well to lure him to London for the exhibition of four new works that opens this week. He is the man of the moment, and yet he is the history man, too.

"One of the things I'm interested in," he tells me, "is not just how information about the past is received, but how we return to previous periods to retrieve material and restage it in the here and now."

Camden has some fine examples of this thinking, and in works that are serendipitously tailored to an English setting. One film, *The Spirit and the Letter*, was shot last month at Greenford Studios, West London, and addresses the legacy of the 18th-century novelist,

essayist and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft; another piece, *False Future*, films activity on Leeds Bridge more than a century after Louis Le Prince did exactly the same thing in 1888, and left the world with a single second of motion picture that predates the more famous films by Thomas Edison and the Lumière Brothers.

He has also produced a series of works that entice visitors to use mirrors to read texts revealing strange facets of local history. And, in another film, *Everything I Need*, he has examined the moments in the life of the psychologist and feminist Charlotte Wolff, when she travelled from London, where she spent most of her life, to Berlin, her home until 1933.

What has drawn so many critics to Buckingham's work, apart from its uncommon beauty, is that he has evolved out of a generation of auteurs who were eager to pull apart the seamless language of conventional cinema and lay it open to view. He explains: "Knowing something as simple as how many cameras were used to shoot something can be very revealing. "I've always been fascinated by the films that were made at the point when film-making tools were made portable — 1958 to 1960. It was suddenly possible to record synchronised sound outside the studio. Looking at those films now, it is possible to see what the people then thought of the tools, and what they thought they were doing."

Inevitably, such thoughts do not blockbusters make. One of Buckingham's favourite films is an experimental exercise by William Greaves enticingly entitled *Symbiopsychotaxi-plasm: Take I*, in which three camera crews do battle to record different aspects of the same event. So the Hollywood Hills never beckoned? "No," he laughs, "I was always more interested in what happens when you take these tools and move them into other contexts."

Yet Buckingham has learnt and digested the lessons of figures such as Greaves, so he feels no need to create films with the same kind of frankness about the medium's nuts and bolts; instead, he sees those lessons as occasions for subtle play. In both the films about Wolff and Wollstonecraft, for instance, he seems to play with the conventions of costume drama. To make the former, he searched out an old Caravelle passenger jet that had been popular in the period that Wolff's flight took place (it had been retired to a Danish science museum). And instead of filling it with actors, he left it empty and simply sent his camera over its aged fittings while a voiceover read from Wolff's memoirs.

To reanimate Wollstonecraft, he employed an actress to read from the author's (slightly altered) writings so that she appears to be looking back on the oppression of her time from the present day. But Buckingham doesn't ask us to suspend our disbelief in the conventional manner of costume drama, suggesting instead that she is a ghost walking about on the ceiling of a period interior. The device is apt given that one of Wollstonecraft's arguments for sexual equality was that we are all equal as immortal souls.

Buckingham is among a new generation of artist/film-makers who have rejected the

conventions of video art and borrowed from narrative film. The move allowed him to pull together his disparate interests. As a student he felt it essential to integrate his courses in literature and art history into his art. But his parents, both teachers, obviously influenced him much earlier. Buckingham has the temperament of a scholar as well as an artist, and that demeanour is reflected in the pace at which he makes his art — *The Spirit and the Letter* had been germinating for eight years before it was finished last month. But he doesn't seem to mind those delays. Doing all this investigative hunting in parallel with his more bookish research makes him appreciate all the more the curious ways in which the past reaches out to the present.

He says he was fascinated to have been in London recently during events to commemorate the abolition of slavery. And in Wollstonecraft's altered monologue, he encourages us to ask whether the oppression that she wrote about really has disappeared. The issues, he says, are far from settled.

Camden Arts Centre, Arkwright Road, London NW3 (www.camdenartscentre.org 020-7472 5500), until Jul 1