

## Mark Soo's Several Circles a richly layered and compellingly interlocked work of art

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At the [Or Gallery](#) until January 29

Nearly three years ago, about the time the American auto industry was verging on collapse, Mark Soo was walking on an English Bay beach. Then, to his surprise, a paddle-wheeler party boat chugged by, blasting techno music across the water. Both sight and sound struck Soo as crazily incongruous but, at the same time, inspiring. In *Several Circles*, his new film installation at the Or Gallery, the Vancouver-based artist, curator, and sometime musician has made creative sense of this experience. He has also produced a richly layered and compellingly interlocked work of art.

The best thing about *Several Circles* is how seamlessly it addresses its theoretical subject—the ways in which new technologies displace old—without being dry or didactic. The visuals and soundtrack fold us hypnotically into the installation and, equally hypnotically, into Soo's ideas. Against the north wall of the darkened gallery, two large, movie-format screens stand side by side. As the five-minute loop begins, we see a small white car—a 1998 Ford Escort—on the left-hand screen and a big white paddle wheeler on the right. Both appear to be moving steadily toward the line between the two screens, the one driving on a narrow road running along a bank of the Tennessee River and the other churning its way along the river's murky green waters. Behind the visuals, the subdued splashing and chugging sounds of the paddle wheeler are overridden by a throbbing mix of Detroit techno.

Initially shot on film, the silky-smooth footage of both car and paddle wheeler quickly gives way to disruptive, screen-filling overlays of pixels. The pixels sometimes arrange themselves into barbed vertical stripes, and at other times into a colour-saturated plaid. Soo achieved this effect by playing the original film images on a TV monitor and reshooting them in digital video with a zoom lens in front of the TV. By moving toward and away from the digitally mediated images, focusing on details and, at the same time, breaking up the images with the enlarged pixilation, he creates a shifting screen between us and the action. Each of his two original cameras, one in the car, one on the boat, stare at each other in an almost predatory

way.

The receding of the celluloid-film medium following the development of digital video, as alluded to here by the intrusion of the conspicuous pixels, parallels the other technological innovations and displacements that Soo is investigating: the 19th-century steam engine being usurped by the 20th-century internal-combustion engine; and the notable musicianship of Motown in the 1960s and '70s giving way to the machine-made Detroit techno of the 1980s. Other linked displacements include the importing of Japanese electronics to create the Detroit techno sound; the replacement of the analogue synthesizers and drum machines of the '80s by their digital imitators in the '90s; and the decline of Detroit's auto industry as production soared in Japan and other parts of Asia.

But, again, the truly nifty accomplishment here is that Soo's musings on history and technology are wrapped in such a beguiling package. It's possible to enjoy the visuals and sound on a purely sensory level. And to watch repeatedly, trying to catch the magical moment when the car and the boat switch screens and move away from each other, toward the throbbing darkness.

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