

KATE MACGARRY



British artist-filmmaker Ben Rivers has made a striking feature debut with *'Two Years at Sea'*, a mesmerising portrait of life on the margins. He talks to **Andréa Picard**

A MAN APART

What could possibly appear more strange or uncanny to many of us today than silence, slow action and solitariness? As the world increasingly follows its fervour and civilisation clamours to keep up, irrational timeouts have cultivated our dreams and become the stuff of fantasy. For the past decade, London-based artist-filmmaker Ben Rivers has explored alternate worlds on this very earth via short films and gallery installations that offer up other ways of living and being. With an affection for utopian novels like Sir Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, and a recurring Ballardian sense of underlying urban dystopia, Rivers has consistently headed for the hills – fertile ground for his imagination, with atmospheric climes and textures ripe for recording on his 16mm Bolex camera.

Feted internationally for his neo-ethnographic explorations of curious, hermetic existences – such as *Ah, Liberty* (2008) and *Origins of the Species* (2008) – and in some cases vanishing environments, as in *Sack Barrow* (2011), Rivers has successfully extended his signature themes and style into long-form with *Two Years at Sea*,

his mesmerising and award-winning feature debut. Revisiting the forest-dwelling subject of his earlier 14-minute film *This Is My Land* (2006), Rivers observes Jake Williams, who lives alone with his black cat in the woods of Aberdeenshire, entirely off the grid, fulfilling daily rituals that sustain him and his freedom.

While comparisons can and have been made with the films of Argentine auteur Lisandro Alonso (known for his portraits of solitary and strikingly silent men, especially his 2001 debut *La libertad*, with its pared-down cycle of working, eating, shitting and sleeping), *Two Years at Sea* is less concerned with questioning the nature of freedom that attends manual work under an open sky, than with mythic time and the effect of the somewhat strange physical human imprint upon inhabited rural terrain. That Jake is filmed in Scope is unsurprising given Rivers's previous use of the anamorphic lens, most auspiciously in his heady sci-fi featurette *Slow Action* (2010), but here this lone man's navigating of expansive spaces unapologetically conjures the sublime.

Jake is nameless, unidentified and nearly wordless in *Two Years at Sea*. Looking like a cross between a twinkly-eyed Father Time and an ancient Roman bust come to life with wild mane

and bushy beard, he exists in an undetermined time and place electrified by a protean life force – thrillingly expressed through Rivers's hand-processed, rich and moody monochromatic images – that's completely at odds with today's pace and rampant technological transformations. His is an analogue world, replete with audiocassettes and record player, pen and paper.

Little is revealed about Jake, apart from his amazingly eclectic taste in music (from Indian to Hawaiian honky-tonk and folk), which – in startling counterpoint to the pervasive quiet – is heard blaring from his truck or from the gramophone ingeniously rigged to the facade of his ramshackle house. Jake also has a penchant for quirky interventions into the landscape, such as hoisting a caravan up a tree as a sort of teetering trailer-park Futuro house. His gestures are jittery, joyful, impulsive and determined; the central mystery of his identity is both tempered and fuelled by time-worn photographs that emerge and fill the frame as interstitial transitions or chapter headings between scenes,



ARTIST AND MODEL
Ben Rivers, right, filming in the kitchen of Jake Williams, left, whose reclusive Aberdeenshire existence is lovingly chronicled in *'Two Years at Sea'*

telltale signs of a less solitary past.

Despite its attenuated narrative elapsing over a few seasons and its long, lingering takes – some nearing ten minutes as we watch Jake float and fish on a makeshift raft in a neighbouring loch, or fade to black by the dimming light of a campfire – *Two Years at Sea* is far from minimalist. The film itself is buoyed by a generosity of vision, spirit and affectionate humour that obviate austerity and further distinguish it from Alonso's more Bressonian *La libertad*. The pulsating widescreen images hover and surge with electrified meteorological detail, but also with bits of fusian-like dust and goopy watermarks that correspond to the messiness of Jake's heap-filled home.

With several caravans' worth of belongings, in addition to the objects in his house, Jake is a pack rat whose ample, knick-knacky possessions crucially contribute to the film's sculptural nature. With moments reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark's filmic architectural cut-outs, *Two Years at Sea* is a portrait of a sentient human being, but one that pays keen attention to the light cast from the forms and objects – and especially windows and walls – that surround Jake and his cat. "You can say as much filming some empty

bottles on a shelf [as] you can hearing Jake talk about living in that place for the last 20 years," Rivers tells me in a phone interview.

After specialising in sculpture and installation at art school, Rivers was initially drawn to film because of his interest in space. "Film could deal with space in a much more satisfying way," he says. "You have more control over how an audience interacts with space and time." His use of the word space is obviously suggestive of the compositional elements and depth of his images, but also holds a more philosophical meaning leading to the fundamental (and age-old) questions about the nature of filmmaking that *Two Years at Sea* aroused during its travels around the international film-festival circuit. "I really wanted to move much more towards a fiction, that space," Rivers explains. "That line that people talk about between fiction and documentary became much more blurry."

Flouting the notion of an objective documentary image, Rivers refuses to provide his film with a label. "It's up to other people to categorise the work," he insists. "So if a documentary festival wants to show it, that's fine by me, but I'm not going to call it a documentary. I'm going to call it cinema. All cinema has

varying levels of construction, and that's what's so interesting about it. I never set out to make a representation of Jake's life. I set out to make a film which is very close to his life, but it's a film that in the end exists for itself. In and for itself. And I think that's a really crucial distinction."

Citing the work of Robert Flaherty, Humphrey Jennings and even the Lumière brothers as examples where fiction and documentary meet and become intertwined, Rivers is less interested in discussing a cinema of the 'in between', though he's very conscious of the fact that much of his work does indeed raise questions about the nature of ethnography, and purposely interrogates the genre. What he will say is that *Two Years at Sea* is "an exaggeration of certain parts of Jake's life", stressing the collaborative working relationship between his subject and himself. Rivers scripted the film, but made alterations whenever Jake felt a task or action would be "out of character". Asked why he chose to go back to Jake when an award from the Film London Artists' Moving Image Network provided the impetus to work on his first feature, Rivers responds: "Jake was the first. Before I made *This Is My Land*, I had never considered making anything even closely resembling a documentary, or something that

Ben Rivers Two Years at Sea

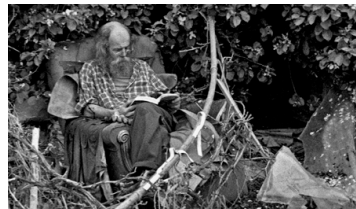
involved real people in their actual places. Everything before was constructed or made by myself. He holds a pretty important place in my filmmaking development."

Setting some rules for himself at the outset, Rivers chose as a challenge to make a feature with a sole character and without dialogue – as a way of creating cinema out of an alternate language in order to "immerse the viewer in a world atmospherically and with a different kind of intellectual engagement... a language of gestures and movements. There's a language of the objects seen in the film, of space and of the way that space is constructed," he continues. "You can look at what he's accumulated and see it as a kind of language built up to portray the person he is. From the things that one surrounds oneself with emerges the language of cinema."

But this sculptural form and materialist inclination by no means lead to abstraction, as *Two Years at Sea* evinces a genuine intimacy while inviting the wilds of fantasy. Rivers's references are largely literature-based, among them Doris Lessing, J.G. Ballard and in this case Norwegian author *maudit* Knut Hamsun, whose *Pan* (also the inspiration for Guy Maddin's 1997 cult classic *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*) provided a starting point for the film's fiction. But Rivers's work also shares affinities with the likes of George Kuchar, Chick Strand, Bruce Baillie and Margaret Tait – all fiercely independent cinematic portraitists with singular voices whose films have so brilliantly, and often movingly, summoned the strange from the everyday with an unassumingly precise formal language. One could add Jean Vigo to that august list.

Along with his friend Michael Sippings, Rivers co-founded Brighton's adventurous Cinematheque, where for ten years the duo delved into programming with a philosophy that celebrated an expansive definition of cinema, adopting a resolutely non-hierarchical approach.

MAN FOR ALL SEASONS
'Two Years at Sea' depicts a life that's solitary but rich in its texture and its connection with nature



'You can look at what he's accumulated and see it as a language built up to portray the person he is'

Any given calendar would mix documentaries with experimental films, silent cinema and works by less-anointed directors like Paul Verhoeven. This ethos of generosity, playfulness and experimentation has unquestionably informed Rivers's filmmaking. ("It was my film school, in a way," he says.) While he concedes that his very early work was influenced by the off-kilter and iconoclastic worlds created by Georges Franju, Walerian Borowczyk and Universal horror, he eventually immersed himself in an ocean of film-watching as a way to purge his initial thoughts about what cinema should be. "Suddenly I was watching and showing so much of it that the slate was wiped clean," he says.

As in his programming, Rivers likes the idea of his work being uncategorisable. He's resistant to being labelled an experimental filmmaker, even though that's the term he's been assigned for obvious reasons – not the least of which is his chosen 16mm medium. There are clear parallels between his subjects and his filmmaking methods, both marginal to the mainstream and remarkably self-sufficient. Rivers wrote, directed, shot and edited *Two Years at Sea*, and even hand-processed the footage in his sink, having cleaned out the world's supply of Kodak Plus-X, a high-contrast black-and-white stock that was discontinued just as he began filming.

Notwithstanding the sounding of the Plus-X death knell and the recent spate of 16mm lab closures, Rivers remains committed to shooting on celluloid for as long as he possibly can. And

this despite the unfortunate series of setbacks that have held up his debut feature's 35mm blow-up for more than half a year: a lab closure, a temporarily lost negative, another lab's relocation etc. Likening the drama to witchcraft, Rivers is exceptionally good-natured about the whole saga, recognising the irony between having to premiere the film digitally and his interest in ruins, detritus and eschatological scenarios that double as loving odes to a dying medium.

Two Years at Sea harbours enough mystery and ambiguity to invite multiple readings, though it nevertheless joins what Rivers calls his "post-apocalyptic-last-man-type films" – ones that exist in the future even though they look like they're from an ashen, distant past. These films stem from "a slightly bleak worldview", he acknowledges. "The films are hopeful in a way – there's joy in them – but there's also an underlying unease about the present. It's certainly not all roses, the world we live in, and it worries me. How does one survive in a world that's been depleted? We've taken for granted so many of our luxuries. What happens when you take those away?"

Filmmakers like Lav Diaz and Béla Tarr have recently grappled with similar issues specific to their own circumstances and experience – evidence, perhaps, of a global gloom. And yet *Two Years at Sea* is in many ways the opposite of Tarr's devastating swansong *The Turin Horse*, offering birdsong instead of howling winds, independence instead of entrapment, and wafting nostalgic melancholia (or is it a *Walden*-esque happiness and plenitude?) instead of Nietzschean despair. "My films are propositions," Rivers concludes. "I never want to be dogmatic. I hope the film is a way of exciting the imagination of the viewer to alternate possibilities."

■ *'Two Years at Sea'* is released on 4 May, and is reviewed on page 81. *'Slow Action'* is showing at the Hepworth, Wakefield until 10 June