There There Anxious Future

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Compared to other fundamental concepts in modern physics, we know little about time. What is it anyway? Does it exist independently of space? Does it exist independently of the mind? Can it only ever move forward? Can it stop? Are there any times other than the present moment? Why does it fly for those having fun but drag on and on for the bored, the infantile and the stoned?

I've never been big on the term 'time-based art'. Used vaguely to refer to any art that makes use of duration, doesn't it overlook the fact that everything is based in time and subject to duration? It does, however, seem an appropriate term for the multi-media work of Ms. & Mr. (aka Richard and Stephanie nova Milne), given that time is not only the medium at hand, but also the message.

In their recent solo show There There Anxious Future at Kaliman Gallery in Sydney, the matrimonial art entity presented the latest manifestations of their ongoing practice of 'Retroactive Collaboration'. Using home movies and childhood drawings from their personal archives and layering them with new images and meanings, they create non-linear timelines where things can exist in places they previously could not. Time becomes more flexible and less unidirectional as their younger selves are granted entirely new contexts and experiences, and new relationships between their past and future selves are explored.

My wife, Caroolee Weinstein, and one mouth of a wormhole are in a spaceship far from Earth, and I am in our home in Pasadena near the other mouth. The distance through the wormhole is very short, so Caroolee and I can hold hands through it, romantically, as she sails around in interstellar space. If we want to do more than hold hands, then I can crawl through the wormhole into her spaceship... In my home in Pasadena, the flow of time is slowed a bit by Earth's mass, while in Caroolee's spaceship in interstellar space, with no massive bodies nearby, time flows at its normal, faster pace. After a while this difference of flow rate transforms the wormhole into a time machine: Caroolee can travel backward in time by crawling through the wormhole, and can then climb into another spaceship and fly out into interstellar space and meet her younger self.

By including this quote on their exhibition room sheet, the artists paid tribute to the controversial American theoretical physicist Kip Thorne, whose work they've been interested in for some time. Thorne was one of the first to conduct scientific research into whether the laws of physics could permit space and time to be connected in multiple ways (i.e. whether time travel could ever be possible). He has also worked as an advisor on several Hollywood film scripts and treatments that deal with the concept of time travel.

Above: There There Anxious Future (works from left to right): Ms. & Mr, First House (The Optimist), 1984/2009, (restored drawing); acrylic, ink and pencil on school issued paper; Ms. & Mr, Retroactive Walk, 2009, video still (found educational footage from CERN Science Facility at the Large Hadron Collider) composited with HDV and animation, Installation view, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney. Photo: the artists.

Relating to their own work as ‘domestic sci-fi’, Ms. & Mr. like the way Thorne cuts through his speculative scientific theory with allusions to romance. In the passage above, he explains the concept of a wormhole with the example of being able to romantically hold hands with his wife as she sails around interstellar space—as if this sort of gesture would be the ultimate feat of space-time travel.

Mobilising a wormhole between a 11-year-old Richard and an adult Stephanie, Framedrag (1988/2009)—one of the three video works in the show—proposed a similar romantic application of the idea of time travel. Seldom seen separately, Ms. & Mr. are self-diagnosed with ‘chronic co-dependency’. So like much of their past work, Framedrag came from an impulse to create a new, shared history by retrospectively inserting themselves into the other’s documented memories, proposing a parallel world where they have always existed side-by-side.

Though it remains a relationship that can only exist on the screen, Stephanie’s (re)union with her lover as a child is a triumph over the predicament that Richard had once lived his life without her, without even knowing she existed. It is the pre-pubescent Mr. who seemingly has the knowingness and wisdom in this intimate scene, as he gently strokes his future Ms. while puffing on a cigarette. The title of the exhibition further emphasises the notion that, by giving their former selves new narratives, they are letting their pasts console and comfort the troubled present/future.

The original footage of the 11-year-old Richard was taken when he was filmed unawarely by his older brother who was waiting to catch him on camera picking his nose in his sleep. By using it in a setting of their own making, the artists defy the exploitative motivation behind the raw material and it instead becomes the source of a new memory, one that they are in control of. It’s a reminder that with the ease and accessibility of home editing software, each of us is now empowered with the capacity to alter the past by altering the images that document it. If memories are painful or unattractive, anyone can make like Ms. & Mr. and change them to their liking.

While there is nostalgia here, it is also an optimistic liberation of memories from the stasis of the past into living narratives that exist in the present, and continue into the time ahead. Accommodating the future, Ms. & Mr’s exhibition also included an ‘unfinished’ video work titled 2024. Preparation for space-time dilatation and Her, (2009/2024). Here they provide an entry point to a ‘wormhole’ taking us to 2024 (the year of Ms. & Mr’s actual 25th wedding anniversary), which will see the arrival/digital insertion of Stephanie (Her) into the work. Meanwhile Richard remains suspended in the video’s parallel world of disembodiment and incompleteness.

There There Anxious Future didn’t mark any major new developments for the duo, who have been practicing this sort of ‘Retroactive Collaboration’ for over four years. What it did confirm was that their art of adaptation and restoration is entwined with open-ended questions about matrimony, time, cinema, authorship and memory, which are far from being exhausted. Exploring where materiality ends and fantasy begins, they continue to ask how memory is constructed in the digital age and what the philosophical implications might be of colliding past, present and future. Time-based art indeed.

Ms. & Mr’s There There Anxious Future was exhibited at Kailman Gallery, Sydney from 24 July to 15 August, 2009.