processing paradoxes

fiona mcgregor: samuel james, ms & mr, artspace

IT IS UNIVERSAL THAT ARTWORKS VIEWED BY CRITICS UNDERGO CERTAIN TRANSMISSIONS IN THEIR RECALL, IN THAT SENSE WE ARE NEVER REVIEWING ART. ONLY OUR MEMORIES OF ART. THEIR TRANSMISSIONS WILL BE SHOT THROUGH WITH OUR OWN IDEAS, EXPERIENCES, KNOWN EXPERTISE, OBSERVATIONS AND DISCOVERIES. BUT BEYOND NEUROCHEMISTRY, BEYOND SUBJECTIVITY THERE IS A KIND OF INTEGRITY WHICH MUST GO BACK TO THE WORK ITSELF. MOST SIMPLE. WE CAN SAY, TRUST THIS. OR NOT.

In Samuel James’ Modes of Misunderstanding I & II, has large projections on the wall alternate with a farmer stroking across a dry paddock towards the camera and a group of performers staggering through the bush in a state of abused disorientation. The farmer, initially a distant dot on a vast expanse of cracked earth, approaches with the inevitability of weather, reduction figures as various as Billuloo’s shimmering ghost, Biblical figures and Australian news reports of drought. It’s such a familiar image, in fact, that I disregard it at first. The bush, a section of coastal dune forest at Baradine, is lush and inviting, the trees perhaps small pines. While one performer touches a tree impulsively, another falls about laughing. They are lost, but they’re having fun. Despite these, doubled as well—reflection upon reflection—and small videos filmed on rock shelves across which the camera of the lost souls tracks back.

Belgian choreographer Hans van de Bovenkamp, who directed these group performances, wanted to do a piece that showed these people relating to the landscape. James’ take is that as middle-class whites who live in the city, the notion of them having a connection to the bush is ironic. Indeed, van de Bovenkamp’s wish can seem like a typical naive foreigner’s baseless fantasy about Australia. In this sense the farmer and his paddock are endgame. But James’ wit and ingenuity offer a more open view, in spite of himself, there is a connection of sorts taking place: how humbling, uncertain, insistent. In whatever fashion, these people are a part of this place.

In the next room is Amygdales Fear of Conditioning, the centrepiece in a way, conceptually if nothing else, because the amygdala is the structure in our brains that processes emotion and memory, and it is the expression of this process that undermines all James’ work here. Fear of conditioning is noted as the driving force behind the performances. Some of us will remember the original from which archival footage was remixed and projected onto screens of different sizes suspended throughout the room. Often the performers are alone. Often the performances are silent. Often the figures are silent. The faces are sometimes out of a dream, Jake McCabe’s from somewhere else. A face in a box, opening, closing, who is it? Martin del Amo’s body doubles in freeze frame, then continues its spiralling up, and from somewhere—be it live performance, a video of it. Sometimes the soundtrack seems perfect with the images, as in a vignette of Rosie Dore, which imparts a strong sense of claustrophobia. Here, as elsewhere, as deconstructed as the footage is, it retains the spirit of the performance. Indeed, the strength of these video works as a whole is in the maintenance of its connection to their primary human resource: all technical wizardry is in service to this.

The same can be said of Mr & Mrs’ 2003/3/8 (grandfather paradox), where the dialogue between these collaborative couple looks at the work with warmth and humour. The title relates to time travel, whereas the conundrum of going back in time to delete a life or an event, thereby changing your present so that you cannot do this, remains unsolvable.

Mr & Mrs’ grandfather shimmers on screen facing the entrance. Blinded and naked from the waist up, in advanced middle age, he seems to be standing in water. The image is static, but alien. In a patch of a baby’s face—Mr—in close up, looking towards the grandfather. This old seer Bootleg is played with eyes closed, he’s administered to his baby, whose expression fuses between fear and wonder. And Ms, the artist as he is now, leans down over his grandfather, and pumping his chest, attempts to reanimate him.

Other elements balance the installation: a rocket shaped scene and one in the shape of a baby in the nappy, on which are projected a story of images endless and chaotic. From the ceiling hangs a long copper cable—or in it a placenta—that drops down into a thick coil on the ground. The world, a books white globe, also receives projections. The space as a whole, as James’ Amygdales is used to its full potential is a swirling how these elements play off one another. Grandfather paradox is an eerie, mesmerising work, deeply personal, with the somatically ambivalent fear of being trapped, or held, in time/technology/place, or simply in relation to another.

My only quip was that James’ Amygdales was installed in such a way that did not invite the audience right in. Hoarding at the entrance gave one a good, but limited view of on opening night. However, we stepped right inside the work, encouraged no doubt by the size of the crowd pressing into the room. "Rubic, how much more fun opening night is," someone remarked to me. "When it’s full of performance artistsiani?"

This installation from the inside was enriched, opposite: 5 visual arts 1997