

OUT OF BODY

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In his video work *Alarmed Girl* Vincent Ward reprises a scene from his first feature film, *Vigil* (1984), in which young actor Fiona Kay runs uncontrollably down a hill, staggering through the uneven, damp grass of central North Island farmland. It's a tense moment as Kay, dressed in an awkward oversized coat, stumbles but doesn't fall, coasting on momentum and gravity. In the film, her character, Toss, has just seen her father die and is probably not entirely cognisant of her actions, operating on instinct, emotionally traumatised and oblivious to her conditions. The scene is filmed in one take, a raw moment that would be difficult to recreate - like jumping off a waterfall for the first time and not knowing what is at the bottom, it is a gesture that would become contrived with successive attempts.

As filmmaker John Boorman has described it, Ward's work is an ongoing journey to the end of the earth.¹ Travelling across time, space and cultural divides, his characters venture into the unknown and are forced to negotiate their place in alien environments. Ward's 2010 book *The Past Awaits: People, Images, Film* is peppered with stories of people surviving in a strange world - outsiders struggling in the tide of existence, out of their depth but channelling life itself.² Some characters are familiar from his films, including co-dependent Puhī and Niki from *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1981) and *The Rain of the Children* (2008); others are more fleeting personal recollections, such as the blind homeless man he finds lying prone in the middle of the road on Sunset Strip.

Ward has described how, with *Vigil*, he wanted to recreate his childhood perception of the world.³ This was a primal upbringing of extended periods alone, left to his own devices to explore the vast farmland his family lived on near Greytown in the lower North Island. He grew up amongst animals, exposed to the unforgiving forces of nature, prompting wild

imaginary adventures, unfettered by the restrictions of an urban environment. It is exactly this intensity; the vulnerable sensation of first-time experience; on the brink of understanding and control; caught in an uncontrived rush of experience, which recurs in Ward's films and is a primary motif of the recent artworks documented by this publication.

Shifting from cinema to the art gallery, Ward's latest work spans drawing, painting, photography, performance and moving image installation, often in a combination that has bounced from one medium to another to become layered into a final canvas or projection. In some cases he has revisited footage from earlier films, allowing motifs such as Kay's protracted stumble to function as a stand-alone scenario, removed from a larger narrative structure to allow more direct consideration of how the body functions in a particular situation. But this jump from cinema to installation is a fairly unforced translation given that Ward is renowned as a visual filmmaker who avoids a reliance on dialogue, allowing the physicality of his images to do most of the work. As *New Zealand Listener* reviewer Anthony Byrt confirms, there is something visceral about Ward's work that resonates in a bodily and emotional response.⁴

A new group of works feature nude figures submerged in water and cocooned within a transparent bag or membrane. Their submersion causes an empathetic discomfort, heightened by the claustrophobic bags, as they struggle to the surface or drift as if barely conscious. The scene is too dark and tightly cropped to provide any real context; time and place are undefined, leaving only the perplexing sight of life without air. There is a hint of science fiction in this surreal scene, which recalls the fact that Ward once worked on the early development of *Alien 3* (these could be breeding pods, life support chambers, a prison or womb-like setting) but it is primarily the formal

dynamics of the physical situation that engages the viewer. Like his other characters, these figures are exposed and vulnerable, placed in an extreme situation where existence seems precarious. As writer Louis Nowra, a collaborator on Ward's film *Map of the Human Heart* (1993), has eloquently said, 'This delicate balancing of life and death is pervasive in his images of water . . . Life is always perched on the edge of evanescence or acquiescence to the primal forces of the natural world.'⁵

This sense of brinkmanship verging on helplessness avoids the contrivance usually inherent in acting, a distinction that was important in the early development of performance art, which frequently focussed on physical situations as a way to challenge our assumptions of the human condition. By establishing a physically challenging situation, often to do with bodily exertion and endurance, the activity could distinguish itself from the structures of conventional theatre entertainment. Through ritualistic actions or task-based activities, performance artists created live art that was more life than artifice; events that engage directly in the real world of everyday existence, where the body is not only the subject but also the material. Because of this intense focus on the body, clothing was often reduced to a relatively neutral worker's boiler suit or eliminated entirely. In painting or performance, working with the nude pares things back to the basic facts of the situation, to minimise the artifice or distraction of costumes, and to heighten the sense of vulnerability.

When artist Marina Abramović performed *Nude with Skeleton* (2002/05/10) lying naked under a skeleton, it distilled the event down to sheer existence and mortality; the anatomical structure of the body, the living presence of the performer, and her breathing. It was a dialogue with death, causing the skeleton to rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation, employing

the definitive inanimate bodily form to amplify the simple facts of a live bodily presence. Breath and breathlessness are also features of *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977), which Abramović performed with partner Ulay, locked in an intimate exchange as if kissing, alternately inhaling as the other exhaled until they both passed out, almost suffocated by carbon dioxide from the other's lungs.

Although it was once important to distinguish performance (and video) art from theatre or cinema to establish a new art-form, this is no longer an issue, with post-modern works quoting and adopting entertainment genres and tropes, most notably the big-budget film productions by Matthew Barney, which involve sets, actors, costumes and even elaborate prosthetics. Ward's underwater works can be likened to Barney's in that they use props as a form of restraint, to problematise and heighten aspects of the performance, and as sculptural materials to introduce historical or mythological references.

It is interesting to note that even Abramović has moved away from purist attitudes, where each event should be a unique live experience and the involvement of the artist as a performer was crucial. For a 2005 series at the New York Guggenheim, Abramović explored the idea of re-performance, where a performance work could be treated like a musical score that can be repeatedly performed by any person. With permission, she performed seven famous works by seven different artists, including one of her own. In 2011 she took this further and employed dancers to continually reenact a selection of her works (in shifts) for the duration of her retrospective exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Significantly, she chose dancers rather than artists to re-perform her works, noting their physical training and stamina.⁶ In this regard, she becomes like a director, employing a range of specialists to execute a production.

Ward has also worked with dancers, not only for the filmed and photographed underwater works, but also as models for his recent large format paintings. In these latter works they are like advanced life models, hung from cranes to create extreme bodily configurations that result in images of people beyond the bounds of typical human experience, flying, falling, crashing; in states of exhilaration, awe and terror. They recall performer Carolee Schneeman's live performance *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973 – 76), in which she suspends herself in a harness and rope from a ceiling while drawing, a response to painter Jackson Pollock's gestural processes (and perhaps also Yves Klein's painting of canvases with the paint-smearred bodies of naked models).⁷ As performance historian RoseLee Goldberg has said, the physicality of painting, and the physical connection between the artist's body and canvas, has led to many performances where the body has become a key material in the painting process.⁸

A more graphic comparison is Schneeman's *Terminal Velocity* (2001), a photographic study, scanned from newspapers, of bodies falling from the World Trade Centre in the midst of the 9-11 tragedy. As one reviewer describes it, 'We find ourselves equally curious and pained by these images, which in their frozen state become iconic depictions of the inescapable dance of death or, as the title of a related work suggests, the uncertain plunge into the "Dark Pond."⁹

This freefalling dance with gravity is a motif Ward has explored since the outset of his career, including the aforementioned scene from *Vigil*, the plunge from the church spire in *The Navigator* (1988), and the young Avik experiencing flight on a trampoline in *Map of the Human Heart* (1993). His characters ascend and descend, flying, falling, floating, sinking, trapped, released, withdrawn, ejected – sometimes

metaphorically, such as Robin Williams' descent into purgatory in *What Dreams May Come* (1998). In Ward's new work, it's sometimes ambiguous whether the figure is rising, falling or flying; above or below the surface; in the water or in the air; trapped beneath ice, or perhaps it is the viewer that is trapped?

The result of these shifting altitudes and deep submersions is a sense of isolation or alienation, comparable to the remote landscapes of Ward's earliest films, *A State of Siege* (1978) or *In Spring One Plants Alone*. This sense of physical and psychological seclusion, of being lost in our own world, was described just prior to the release of *Vigil* as an 'exploration of isolation and human experience at its most reduced, primeval level.'¹⁰

A few years later, for *Edge of the Earth*, Ward recalled an influential moment from his childhood:

Once I saw a hawk dive out of the sky and pluck the eyes from a live lamb. I was not surprised because like most children growing up in the country, I accepted the farm's casual violence as part of the natural order.¹¹

This early affinity with animal life sets the scene for another motif that has occasionally recurred in Ward's films, and is further explored in the new works. It is an even more basic and primeval experience – the connection between humans and animals. In considering the 'creaturely' nature of human life, an animal instinct and connection to surroundings that usually eludes humans, Eric Santner says our proximity to animal life becomes evident at the stage where both are 'in some fashion abandoned to a state of exception.'¹² This is a description that could apply to most of Ward's characters, who encounter injured

sheep, ghostly horses and distressed birds. In the subterranean world, dancers share their aquatic tableau with fish, which lurk in the foreground, background, and even inside the bags with the performers. Neither human or fish seem to respond to each other and their co-existence becomes a comforting image, as if their passive acceptance confirms an affinity or even co-dependence.

When further researching *In Spring One Plants Alone* for his later docu-drama *The Rain of the Children*, Ward learned of a psychic connection the handicapped Niki is said to have had with animals, thought to be a spiritual link with his late mother, Puhī.¹³ This is manifest in a scene that is reprised as the new video work *Kin* (2011), where Niki finds himself naked and lying in the middle of a deserted main street. There is no light except for the full moon and the world seems to slow down to a dream-like pace, while a white horse approaches and contemplates the large man. Again, like Kay's tumble through the farmland, this is filmed in one take with a barely controllable stallion contemplating the strange sight of a displaced outsider. It is in these elusive moments of performance that Ward is able to put us outside our self-conscious bodies to experience creaturely sensations in a human world.

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