

## Vincent Ward: Breath – the fleeting intensity of life

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Vincent Ward's memorable filmic work has crafted a haunting presence in the collective imagination; he is an image-maker whose uniquely visual contribution to filmmaking in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally is both singular and powerful. **Breath – the fleeting intensity of life** explores several bodies of current practice that draw on Ward's unique visual language as a feature filmmaker and his nascent training as a painter at art school in Canterbury. This exhibition is the first survey of Vincent Ward's work within an art museum context and rests, sometimes on edge, in spaces that traverse old and new media. His recent exploration of the still image presents works that coalesce photography, oil painting and digital imaging and are presented alongside a choreographed passage of filmic vignettes, 'motion painting' and soundscapes. Ward says of this work:

I am working to find an alchemical marriage somewhere between the worlds of motion, film and painting. ... Motion Painting – frames of tracked paint on film – is the **bridge between** film, painting, and photography. This uses a plethora of analysis: light, colour, tone, and motion vectors in key frames. Scanned paint strokes are then attached to these tracked pixels to give the effect of paintings in motion. ...We are at a unique juncture where it is truly possible to fuse paint with other media. 1

Ongoing concerns with metamorphosis, falling, light, fear, memory, darkness and the transformative moment has led Ward to create a series of vast, physically imposing works that delve into otherworldly landscapes and transcendent states, to evocations of loss, redemption and unconscious realms.

### HOLDING THE MOMENT

When we first discussed together the idea of a project for Govett-Brewster, Ward immediately retold a story by Saint Bede the Venerable, as follows:

... from this winter's dark a small bird appears through an open window. It flitters momentarily in the firelight before swiftly vanishing ...

Bede was an early English Medieval author and scholar of the Northumbrian Monastery, itself the repository of a marvellous library. His allegorical method of interpretation is not unfamiliar to the processes undertaken by Ward through the experimental, insistent and organic passage of making that has produced this body of work. For Ward, visual allegory is

making that has produced this body of work. For Ward, visual allegory is paramount as he harnesses various material and immaterial forms to delve into states of the psyche and associated heightened emotions. He twists through baroque elaborations of a mysterious visual form, compulsively pursuing an intimate nuclear family of spectral images. Ward exposes his human subjects to vulnerable states, and exposes himself through these works; this exposure is an effort towards closeness, towards a psychological intimacy.

While the films Ward directs and produces are ambitious, unearthly and elaborately visual stories that soar through the imagination and story-telling, this exhibition is concerned more with distillation to the essence of things. In repetitive gestures, he comes back again and again to certain visual motifs: the flapping wings of a bird hovering in space, the urgent flash of headlights turning in the dark, white horses appearing as a nocturnal chimera, a woman struggling underwater, an eerie encounter between a man and a horse in a deserted country town. Time is slowed to imperceptible speed. Emblems and elements of these visual interests appear and disappear in Ward's work in a kind of instinctive possessiveness of the spirit.

Ward writes about these moments:

A moment of stasis, both on screen and over time, burnt in my imagination. I am now trying to find a way to freeze a moment, shape shift it to reveal some essence. I trawl through almost every film I have ever made, looking for these moments, bending and shaping and changing them. These essences are the raw material of this exhibition.

Ward references Stevie Smith, the mid-last century English confessional poet and novelist who was captivated by mortality and fear. (Smith was admired by Sylvia Plath and a friend of George Orwell's.) Smith illustrated her own poems and in a gesture towards androgyny and transformation, Smith accompanied her 1957 poem **Not Drowning but Waving** with drawings that saw the drowning subject of her poem depicted not as the man described in words, but as a flailing woman. Strangely, the same drawing accompanied her 1962 poem **The Frozen Lake**. This image, or at least the sentiments of these poems, could be forebears for Ward's many depictions of women falling in his vast paintings and of sinister watery enclosures that inhabit his films and photographic works.

### SPECTRUM

Roland Barthes uses the term spectrum to describe the object or target of a photograph. Ward's photographs, as in his paintings, allude to deathly possibilities. In the photographic images of struggling, swimming figures that gasp for air (his spectrum) one is reminded of Roland Barthes' linkage between photography and the undead. Barthes writes:

Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people. 2

#### EXPANDED CINEMA

The choreographed passage of moving image entitled **Voyage I – Waystation: When I was 13 I almost drowned ...** and **Voyage II – Ardent Spirit** that forms the fulcrum for the exhibition comprises new digital footage and momentary celluloid fragments from the language of Ward's own filmic past. These fragments are drawn from **Vigil** 1984, **What Dreams May Come** 1998, **River Queen** 2005 and his most recent and perhaps most structurally complex film, **Rain of the Children** 2008. **Voyage I** and **II** could aptly be described as 'expanded cinema', a truly contemporised version of Gene Youngblood's 1970 term. Expanded cinema has been widely used to describe video installation practice in a general sense, yet Ward's work more precisely aligns to Youngblood's original conception of the term in its true exploration of intermedia as a networking of forms. Youngblood explains:

When we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness. Expanded cinema does not mean computer films, video phosphors, atomic light, or spherical projections. Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes. One no longer can specialise in a single discipline and hope truthfully to express a clear picture of its relationships in the environment. This is especially true in the case of the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind.<sup>3</sup>

Recent projects by artists Isaac Julien and Amar Kanwar have offered extraordinarily rich contributions to expanded cinema, these works present multiple channels of moving image – programmed on multiple screens and accompanied by soundscapes – to create multiple narratives that evolve temporally and spatially. The experience for audiences is immersive and indeed expands the conventional cinema, television or single screen experience. As Ward developed *Voyage 1* over time and introduced sound design and composition into the production process, the role of the soundscape became more paramount, casting a precisely wrought atmosphere to enhance the emotional tone of the piece. For Ward, the conjuring of psychological narratives and the empathetic possibility that exists between created worlds and audiences is of foremost concern.

#### CREATURELY LIFE

Inhabiting these insistent images are sentient creatures in motion: horses walking, fish swimming and birds flying. As avatars for the spirit, their presence and uncanny proximity in Ward's visual conversations registers the communicative and at times sensual unknowing between animal and human.

**On Creaturely Life** is a recent book by Eric L. Santner that explores 'creaturely life' or 'creaturely expressivity,' as a concept within 20th century German authors including Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin and W. G. Sebald. 4 Santner asserts that ethical and political life cannot be adequately assessed without attentiveness to 'creaturely life'. The book also furthers an idea he has proposed elsewhere of 'neighbour -love' and the need for openness towards the singularity of others. 5 Indeed there are links to the manic kind of melancholy and 'undeadness' in Sebald's literature and Ward's own melancholic gaze upon darkness. Freud's interpretation of the 'uncanny' and compulsive repetitiveness is referenced by Santner and again has resonance to Ward's own persistence with particular imagery including his abiding interest in the poetic and psychic relationship between animal and human life. In **On Creaturely Life**, Santner explains:

Sebald's writings contain numerous descriptions of animals that have been forcibly drawn into this overheated condition and that themselves come to display the imbalance, the surplus animation, here associated with humankind. The paradox at work here is that only animals that have been 'deterritorialized', removed from their natural habitat, become creatures in the sense I have been elaborating. In a word, we get a glimpse of creaturely life not by seeing or imagining animals in 'the open' but by observing them in various states of disorientation (these are, we might say, animals whose instincts have mutated into drives). What I have been calling creaturely life, then, does indeed mark our resemblance to animals, but precisely to animals who have themselves been thrown off the rails of their nature. 6

Ward's affinity with creaturely life contributes to the other-worldliness of his art, its strangeness and spectral presence. Through his work he obsessively pursues the impossible capturing of momentary transformation and change.

The history of Govett-Brewster in many ways encompasses expanded cinema. It started life as a picture theatre, launched itself in 1970 with an exhibition by Leon Narbey, today one of New Zealand's foremost cinematographers, and continues to champion experimental exhibition making and inter-disciplinary practice. For this publication, Vincent Ward's long-time collaborator, the acclaimed scriptwriter and novelist Louis Nowra has eloquently traced Ward's inherently visual way of working in

film to his current explorative practice. This essay sits alongside four tales written by Ward, three are associated with the making of his films: **In Spring One Plants Alone** 1980, **Rain of the Children**, and **River Queen**, while the last is drawn from Ward's own childhood. Ward describes his childhood as:

...rich in raw and elemental experience, a connection **within** the landscape, a connectedness to the animals around us, sometimes bloody, sometimes gentle, and a feeling of awe and uncertainty at what was happening around me.

Moving locations from Te Urewera to Whanganui and the Wairarapa, these stories are touchstones for key images that in turn become touchstones for more universal fears, desires and phenomena.

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Image: Vincent Ward, 2011, Film still from **Bird in a Room**, part of the cinematic installation **Voyage I – Waystation: When I was 13 I almost drowned...**

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1. All quotes by Vincent Ward in conversation with the author, 2011
  2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p.70
  3. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, with introduction by R. Buckminster Fuller, Clarke, Irwin & Company, Toronto and Vancouver, 1970, p.41
  4. Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2006
  5. Santner previously introduced the idea of 'neighbour-love' in *The Neighbour: Three Inquiries in Political Theory*, co-authored with Slavoj Žižek and Kenneth Reinhard, Chicago and London, 2005
  6. Eric L. Santner, 2006, pp.143-144

