



午騾夕隼飛鳥影
滌山秋月冷猿聲

千字封古香何異到西林
擊桴聲下洞宮升華除詩人
謝安真法侶遠公心
寒香花欲暮深

...

蘇武書迎深塞盡
莊周夢逐落花

碧潭秋晚波凝冷
紅樹風多葉墮紛

管...
遠傳聞世指東流自負霸王
略安知恩澤

AVATARS, TALL-POPPIES AND NON-PLACES

SEAN LOWRY

Transformed into avatars, Shaun Gladwell's latest street performers move slowly through architectural non-places, reminiscent of German conceptual photography. *Yokohama Untitled* (2005), a large HD/DVD work commissioned for the 2005 *Yokohama Triennale*, features break-dancers Yuki, Yuya, Hajime and Taka pausing, pacing and then dropping to the ground to perform in clean lined anonymous urban spaces. Gladwell's latest transformation of street performer into avatar is most pronounced in works such as this, in which the camera trails behind the figure at a distance, simulating the virtuality of worlds such as *Second Life*.¹ It is this sense of trailing performative movement through globally generic architectural non-places (despite subtle regional cultural nuances), with each performer individuated via a customised grab bag of global styles that finally gives Gladwell's already established practice new life.

Invited to exhibit at several international biennales and survey shows within the last five years, presenting a growing list of exhibitions and citations and rapidly becoming one of Australia's best-known younger artists, Sydney based video artist Shaun Gladwell's work was recently chosen by USA curator Robert Storr in this year's *Venice Biennale's* showcase Italian Pavilion. Gladwell's best-known work, *Storm Sequence* (2000) recently sold at auction by Sotheby's in Melbourne for \$AUD84,000. This unprecedented figure for a video work in Australia follows a now well-documented entrance to the world stage. *Storm Sequence* depicted a lone skateboarder (the artist) performing in slow-motion against a Bondi stormscape. Despite an international lauding formed largely in response to this single (now iconic) work, a broader consideration of Gladwell's oeuvre, and in particular his recent work showcased at his solo Artspace exhibition (*Shaun Gladwell: In a Station of the Metro*), is starting to reveal a newer set of considerations. Despite the claims of critics such as Sebastian Smee from *The Australian*, who in reviewing the Artspace exhibition claimed that "subsequent work... hasn't added much" to his "basic ingredients"² (i.e. the use of slow motion, street performers the inclusion of moments before and after each performance), devices such as avatar-like simulations achieved via a camera trailing the performer, the use of architectural non-places, and an increased consideration of architectural specificities within the exhibition space, have all given the viewer a new set of parameters to consider.

Featuring a number of works never before shown in Australia, utilising all Artspace's galleries, Gladwell's largest solo exhibition to date saw the artist beginning to experiment with multi-channel formats and the specificities of the gallery's architecture. The exhibition's title piece, for example, used a split-screen video projected on its side in a right-angled corner. Particularly conscious of framing in space and time, generally favouring long unedited shots and always maintaining a consistent distance between performer and viewer, dynamic relationships between physical movement and architectural space were pronounced. Bystanders, commuters and pedestrians alike appear as subplots within Gladwell's frame, reminding the viewer of other avatars on unrelated trajectories bound only by intersecting temporalities. Rather than offering a representation of street culture in and of itself, Gladwell's work situates such activities within modes of critical representation more commonly associated with themes such as the body, landscape, space and place. Gladwell's use of video technology is finally neither a mode of representation nor an exhibited end but rather a means of inhabiting what Artspace Executive Director (and curator of *In a Station of the Metro*) Blair French has described as a "matrix of relationships between performer, place, artist, viewer, popular media culture, politics and art history".³

Gladwell's characteristic use of slow-motion continues to exploit the visual elasticity of video in order to emphasise both the gravity of physical movement and the moments before and after each performance. Offered in stark contrast with accelerated pace of MTV styled jump-cut editing, slow-motion has allowed Gladwell to cross-pollinate the more contemplative pace of traditional concepts with contemporary formats and subject matter. As French puts it, Gladwell's use of slow-motion actually emphasises rather than abstracts physical characteristics related to the movement of the body in space, such as gravitational mass.⁴ For French, it is particularly important to emphasise Gladwell's study of "real bodies in motion", as distinct to fast-cut cable television's endless iterations of urban and so-called extreme sports.⁵ Gladwell's use of slow-motion consequently occupies a space somewhere between the stillness of photography, the reductive restraint of conceptualism and the gravitational dynamics of a body in motion. According to French, slow-motion "marks the point at which video crosses a threshold from a technology of surveillance to one of forensic representation".⁶ Moreover, as French tentatively suggests, Gladwell's use of slow-motion occupies an "interstitial space between still and moving image".⁷ It is therefore potentially within this interstitial space that the viewer might experience

the contemplative stillness and momentary detail revealed within photography or painting simultaneously within an experience of temporal representation. Gladwell also hints at an interdisciplinary form of collaboration in acknowledging "an element of creativity" in his performers "making it up themselves".⁸

Although much has already been written about the lyrical poetics at play in Gladwell's artwork, apart from the background noise of detractors that largely restrict their tall-poppy commentary to beers at artist-run spaces and the blogosphere,⁹ less has been written about what the success of artists like Gladwell might potentially represent. Where do we place artists indebted to both Duchampian choice and the subjective poetics of making? Do we still have to choose? Is the vast majority of contemporary art not now located somewhere in between? Does either position really suffice? Can we not be agnostic? What do we do with artists that merely employ the ephemera of reproductive technologies without foregrounding their dematerialisation or potential political critique of art's commodity status? Can we not accept art that utilises tools inherited from anti-aesthetic trajectories and (albeit subtly) reapplies them to mere poetic investigation? Despite the claims of its aggressive factions, the expanded problem field that is contemporary art exists as a consequence of the unresolved tensions between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic constructions. For Duchampian 'choice' is meaningless outside the context of an art history falsely predicated upon the heroic value of 'making'. Twentieth-century art history could not have forged a path alongside the infinity of reproductive technologies without resiting the value of choosing over making. Perhaps the tension between the value of making and choosing can never be completely resolved. Perhaps it is out of this unresolved tension that art itself can continue to grow.

If the 1990s, at least in part, was a decade shaped by the legacies of conceptual photography, the first decade of the twenty-first century will surely be remembered for the proliferation of video installation practice. Of course, significant seminal formations in both conceptual photography and video performance/installation practices are located in earlier decades, but like so many other elements within the endless pluralism of contemporary art, since they are now more givens than exhibited ends, they are as a consequence now free to hybridise with a host of other formations. Although the art critic Sebastian Smee claimed that "Gladwell has been seduced into overproduction",¹⁰ one could conversely argue that his latest array of variations in format and in content, as presented at Artspace, have actually



emphasised the speculative rather than the more formulaic aspects of his practice. Possibly as an attempt to distance his practice from the explicit foregrounding of art-historical references made so explicit within late twentieth-century postmodernism (although his video works are consciously “loaded with references”), for Gladwell, these references are “very quiet”.¹¹

Given that the language of reconstructive sampling has overtaken ironic strategies of artistic production, and quotation and repetition are now simply tools of production rather than strategically exhibited ends, new forms of artistic production (whose trajectories have their beginning rather than their end in ironic estrangement) might now be constructed upon their foundations. In that meticulously produced and prosaic fragments are now both attributed an equivalent role rather than necessarily developing meaning on the basis of virgin material, artists such as Gladwell can now equalise the tasks of selection, creation and recontextualisation.

It is often a curious thing to witness the aggressive internal solipsisms of the art world. After all, it is only art. For some, art ‘should’ necessitate political concerns in a world defined by conflict and inequality. For others, art ‘should’ continue to critique modes of representation and continue to serve an exclusively anti-aesthetic agenda. For others, art can still be celebrated as an ironically charged and all-permitting camp pluralism. Perhaps stranger still, many still somehow occupy a curious pre-Duchampian world that still marvels only at ideas related to beauty, skill and the hand. But once again, what if it was actually as a consequence of the unresolved tension between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic, between the political and the banal, between making and choosing, and between the concerns of the individual and the collective, that this strange consensual projection that we still nominate as art seemingly exists? Surely Gladwell’s work is at least as engaging as the work of his detractors. Perhaps it is just another now old-fashioned idea of art simply repositioned with new technology. But, nonetheless, and precisely for reasons that can’t be translated into words, it is visually compelling.

One important difference between so-called critically experimental artists and those, like Gladwell, that later (re)employ the same devices to lyrical effect, is that the so-called experimental artist will paradoxically repeat an insistent resistance to repetition, while their poetic disciples will as a consequence only make art out of, rather than about, that very paradox. For Gladwell, video should hit “immediately like a painting, because it’s all there in one frame”.¹² Cementing a stronger historical relationship to painting than with critical video practice, Gladwell wants his videos to operate more “like moving paintings” that are “constantly playing on the wall as captured moments”.¹³

Perhaps the least successful work is *Handrails* (2007), depicting skateboarders attempting and failing to negotiate a handrail, which together with footage of Jake Brown’s recent *LA X Games* fifteen metre fall, are presented as anomalies within the exhibition. Here Gladwell’s departure from MTV programs such as *Scarred* is far less pronounced, and considering he is no simulationist, do little service to the overall poetry of his oeuvre.



Gladwell finally employs video as a tool rather than as a critical device. Eventually, Gladwell brings his lyrical background as a painter, as opposed to any marked affinity with strategic conceptualism to his work, with video. Emphasised in slow-motion his painterly aesthetic is apparent in his placement of the figure, his use of architectural space, and his invocation of the sublimity of physical forces. Avoiding the cinematism of video, this is work that marries classical devices with contemporary technologies, landscapes and figures rather than offering any radical or self-reflexive meditation upon the use of technology itself. It is therefore futile to discuss his practice within the same breath as seminal, historically significant and critically or politically engaged practitioners within the evolution of video art as a medium. With much video based art, the necessity of the relationship between technology and medium is arguably more pronounced at present than other media. But unlike new media work in which the transparent use of specific software might potentially date a work, Gladwell's work will more likely be dated by its relationship with the fickle ephemera of street fashion. But this relationship is finally incidental. Although historically conscious,

Gladwell's work is concerned with the poetics rather than the politics of body, space and place. It is therefore destined to land lightly, albeit sweetly, upon the myriad trajectories and all-permitting pluralism that is contemporary art.

Notes

¹ See: <http://secondlife.com/>, accessed 24/10/2007

² Sebastian Smee, 'Lucky Dips', *The Australian*, 8 October, 2007; <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22519018-5013572,00.html>, accessed 24/10/2007

³ Blair French, 'Return to Earth', in Blair French (ed.) *Shaun Gladwell: Videowork*, Sydney: Artspace, 2007: 8

⁴ Ibid: 10

⁵ Ibid: 12

⁶ Ibid: 22

⁷ Ibid: 23

⁸ Shaun Gladwell quoted in Elizabeth Fortescue, 'Chairman of the Board', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 2007, <http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,22450687-5013438,00.html>, accessed 24/10/2007

⁹ The Artspace general manager was even forced to enter the blogosphere to correct accusations on The Art Life that Gladwell's commercial representation at Sherman Galleries had secretly bankrolled the exhibition. See <http://artlife.blogspot.com/2007/10/march-of-the-penguins.html>, accessed 24/10/2007

¹⁰ Sebastian Smee, 'Lucky Dips', *The Australian*, 8 October 2007

¹¹ Shaun Gladwell, quoted in Ihor Holubizky with Shaun Gladwell, 'Intentionality and Interpretation', in Blair French (ed.), *Shaun Gladwell: Videowork*: 42

¹² Shaun Gladwell quoted in Elizabeth Fortescue, 'Chairman of the Board', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 2007

¹³ Shaun Gladwell quoted in Louise Schwartzkoff, 'Slow Moves In Bondi Aid Artist's Fast Ride To Success', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 2007: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/slow-moves-in-bondi-aid-artists-fast-ride-to-success/2007/09/18/1189881514625.html>, accessed 24/10/2007

Shaun Gladwell

In a Station of the Metro

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www.artspace.org.au/

Page 245: Shaun Gladwell, *Calligraphy and Slowburn* (production still from *Busan Diptych*), 2006
Above left: Shaun Gladwell, *In a Station of the Metro* (production still), 2006
Above right: Shaun Gladwell, *Yokohama Untitled* (video still), 2005
Photos courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney