

*Shadow Play*

*Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings—  
always darker, emptier and simpler.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The gay science*<sup>i</sup>

*All of this has happened before,  
and it will all happen again.*

J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*<sup>ii</sup>

A decade ago I made an exhibition titled *There's joy in repetition* that featured works by Tony Oursler, Callum Innes, Ann Hamilton and Carl Andre, among others.<sup>iii</sup> Through its material investigations and making, each work expressed a deep resolve that repetition was vital, not just to the accumulation of sensate knowledge required to make work well, but to communicate to the viewer the reservoir of experience that was fundamental to the maker. Rather than constrain, a mindful regime may free the artist from the obligation to consciously innovate. The process itself could be liberating and allow a space for the work to be ambushed by unexpected possibilities, some welcome, some not.

Across the street, Oursler's giant video work *Head (Knocking)* 2000, from his major New York and London installations *The influence machine*, was projected onto a building's exterior. A man in profile is seen to butt his head, time and again, against the architrave of the windows. This apparently mindless and bruising act is either going to lead to a mild concussion or clarity. The mindless hopefully becomes mindful.

Innes's painting *Repetition* 1989 is a manifestation of repetitive processes. The sensitive surface of oil paint, laid down in poised horizontal strokes, itself evidence of repetition, was then carefully removed in delicately finessed corridors with turpentine to channel the eroded residue of pigment from top to bottom. These vertical zips aligned in elegant quivering bands: repetition in form and gesture.

Andre's *11 CulON* 2002 was situated on the floor, utterly metronomic in its regularity. Each of its copper cubes was milled to the same weight and size. The repetition not only led to an accumulation of size and form in the work, but also emphasised the nuances of each piece. This is perhaps true for all the pieces in the exhibition: their desire to repeat offers us an acute awareness of the difference of each attempt.

These works I've mentioned depend on material-based processes, but the exhibition also featured a beautiful video work made by Hamilton titled *Draw* 2003. This mesmerising film follows a trace of red thread snaking through a parchment-like vellum in seemingly relentless circularity, never being pulled free. The work possesses a haunting quality with its uncomfortable rhythmic sound and confined visual theatre.

In 2004, I had yet to meet Judith Wright, though even if I had, I might not have thought to include her work in this exhibition. Her work seems to depend on an ever-morphing embrace of materials, both made and found, orthodox and not, and to be committed to a narrative that seems counterintuitive to the premise of *There's joy in repetition*. Furthermore, Wright's surrealism certainly feels a long way from the reductive language of many of these works, though there is something in the Hamilton piece that threads a link.

I can't help but think of Peter Pan, who had his shadow separated from him, which resulted in him being destined to never grow old—youthful and brave, but denied the dimensions that come with age. I was always horrified by the image of Wendy stitching Peter's shadow back on, but have learned that we require both the shadows and the light in the same way. To understand happiness, we must know sadness; to value possession, we must reconcile loss. Peter himself represented all children who were lost to us and lived in the shadows of our thoughts and feelings.

In Tanazaki's *In praise of shadows*,<sup>iv</sup> the writer speaks to the 'binary' notions that frame much Western thinking—truth made evident via teaching based on high contrast. Tanazaki suggests that eastern philosophy prefers to seek the truth in the shadows; that in the flux and uncertainty of half-light, a deeper revelation is made.

I feel that Wright's newer installations, *A journey* 2011 and *Destination* 2013, openly declare her desire to play and to use theatre and shadow as a tool of recollection. Her curious melancholy puppetry is less about the family of surrealist playmates she assembles, but rather the fugitive shadows they cast, which lengthen and distort, illuminate and fade, like memories. This scavenger sculptor is still painting on the wall but this time with light and shadow. Amid these shadows is a troubled and fraught arena that is nevertheless a place of playful remembrance. She extends an invitation to us to join in this intimate play, aware this is exactly what children enjoy—the comfort of knowing we can reassemble our imaginary worlds.

Even in the large-scale paper works, such as *Relative conversations* 2005-06, one can sense her repeatedly circumnavigating the two-metre sheets of paper; if not dancing, then at least aided by her flexibility and rhythmic sense. Wright moves around each side, working from top to bottom, side to side, and then

inverting the axis so that the traces of figuration retreat further into an atmosphere of rich pigment and the undulations of the Japanese paper.

The traces of physical form in these pieces exist only as shadows, which are hinted at in the curve and sweep of a fulsome body-part. Sensual, cherubic shadow lines fall across the composition but ultimately are subjugated by the materials and repetitive process. Looking at Wright's work over the years, one gets a real sense that the fundamental concerns, at least conceptually, are being repeated and that whatever joy can be felt is due to this repetition making memory tangible.

Recently, a friend was describing a scene in *Breaking bad* between characters Jesse Pinkman and his girlfriend Jane Margolis, where they debate the merits of Georgia O'Keeffe's repeated motif of a door. While Pinkman suggests there is a lunacy in this behaviour, Margolis believes that O'Keeffe was motivated by the fact that the "door was her home and she loved it. To me that's about making that feeling last".<sup>v</sup>

For Wright, the patina of memory and attachment is measured in the shadows. To reconcile loss requires she must stitch her own shadow back on, and the repetition that underpins so much of her practice is very much about making that feeling last.

- i Friedrich Nietzsche, *The gay science* (Chemnitz: Schmeitzner, 1882), 203.
- ii J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911).
- iii *There's joy in repetition*, held at Jensen Gallery, Auckland, 27 April–2 July 2004.
- iv Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, 1977)
- v "Abiquiú" *Breaking bad*, DVD, Vince Gilligan (California: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2011).