

Unwish Dara Gill

After wading through mountains of essays, scientific studies and medical records, studying existential crises and acute anxiety disorders, there was a point when the conversations between Dara and I changed from Kierkegaard and Heidegger to the terrible habit I have of biting the skin on the inside of my mouth. He picks the skin around his fingernails. We both, without noticing, undertake these “self-coping” mechanisms on daily basis. I don’t know when I started doing it, but this habit is now entrenched among an array of barely conscious actions, almost as natural as breathing or blinking to me. I am actually doing it right now. *Untitled (Self-coping – Finger picking)* 2009, was a video work documenting Dara indulging in this action, the subtle evidence of an underlying anxiety he argues is ubiquitous in everyday life. Close up and bordering on grotesque, he documents the action, magnified and contextually abstract on a bright blue background, the strange formality somehow suggestive of a scientific context.

In his latest works, Dara has turned the camera away from himself, shifting from self-analysis to creating what Sartre might describe as a “Theatre of Situations”. In the photographic portrait series *Untitled (Rubber Band Portraits)* we see the subjects placed in the same context as the artist’s worn and bleeding fingers, however the ritual of portraiture is interrupted by the threat of a rubber band being snapped into the face of the subject. The “fight or flight” response to the rubber band, immediate and momentary, is aptly captured in a single frame, opposing the processual documentation of the finger picking.

Untitled (Blinding light box) becomes part of a set for this “Theatre of Situations”, and the audience becomes performer. This work denies the privilege of the portrait sitter - democratising whilst illustrative of the ever present nature of anxiety. An audience member, the subject of a portrait and the artist himself become interchangeable in this body of work, where the commonality of experience is the focus.

In *Unwish*, nothing is quite right. Things are off balance. Impossible tasks are attempted, futile actions are shown, tricks are played, objects are destroyed in ironic acts of frustration. Books neatly placed on bespoke shelving are rendered useless from their purpose, portraits professionally set up are then self-sabotaged, yet the works are complete in their imperfection. An equilibrium of the not-quite, the almost, the never and the always is achieved, and somehow it balances out.

Georgie Meagher



Extracts

The following are extracts from a larger essay written as a critical framework that informs the creation of my current works. It is neither essential nor compulsory for an understanding of the works in this exhibition, but rather my own clarification of the research being made.

Lack

Ernest Bloch in *Principles of Hope* describes anxiety as belonging to a future temporality, phrasing it the 'Not-Yet' (74). In this class of expectant emotions, anxiety stems from a lack of something, the longing for it, and the anticipation of obtaining it. Anxiety therefore situates itself in a class of 'expectant emotions', such as desire, hope and fear.

Expectant emotions are distinguished...from filled emotions by the incomparably greater anticipatory character in their intention... All emotions refer to a horizon of time...but expectant emotions open out entirely into this horizon. (75)

As anxiety is set in a future temporality it can be identified as a sense of foreboding - *something that is nothing*. For Kierkegaard anxiety is born from this internal struggle - to rationalise our place and purpose within an infinite expanse of time - possibilities of choice, of direction, of change. It is ambiguous and confusing, always eluding our logic. In response, one tries to locate an object to blame for these feelings as a "quality or feeling that one refuses to recognise in himself and attempts to locate in another person or thing" (Laplanche, 349).

The state of anxiety is like being in a constant state of readying flight similar to that triggered from the appearance of a threat, but unlike the fleeing or flight catalysed by an object based treat, the ambiguity of anxiety forces a self-triggered flight response for no apparent reason - there is no physical object to fear, no situation to flee. It is nameless and faceless, nothing and everything all at once. For Heidegger, fear is also the process of locating an object for the nothing of anxiety to be projected upon. One singles out an object as the cause of anxiety and 'allows it to matter to us' (65). To fear an object is not necessarily to fear the object itself, but the effect this object has on ones existence - *being-afraid-for-oneself* rather than being afraid of an object. Often there is no object to place this worry into, it forces a somewhat paralysing stillness, a searching within oneself for answers to a cure. Jean Paul Sartre attests to this point in *Being and Nothingness* stating that "anxiety is the anxiety before myself" and the "reflective apprehension of the self." (29)

This reflective apprehension of the self is an expanse of nothing and everything, an unknown, the *possibility of possibility*. Kierkegaard summates it is as a '...limitless, undetermined horror, the shuddering before nothingness...' (Körtner, 63), and goes further, describing the effects as feelings of dizziness;

Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom...freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness (61).

Desire

For Bloch, anxiety from the Not-Yet becomes the hunger that propels one to act out of survival and betterment, coming always from a feeling of "something lacking and [the] want to stop it... [the] dreams of a better life (76)". This hunger never ceases, "we never tire of wanting things to improve. We are never free of wishes..." Bloch is quick to point out though that spirit does not necessarily hope without an object but perhaps 'into the blue' or outwardly to the heavens, incited by the blue of a utopian horizon. "This blue, as a colour of distance' acts as the object when there isn't one, the expanse of the heavens appealing to our desperation, as though an answer or change may come (127).

Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*, recognises the significance of the underlying, yet inherent desire (or 'wish') within anxiety as one of the main driving forces behind human history and development. Becoming manifest as the desire to better a situation and rid oneself of anxiety - on a global level, this desire progresses the human race. Spengler postulates:

There arises in the soul - instantly conscious of its loneliness - the root feeling of longing. It is this that urges "becoming" towards its goal, that motives the fulfilment and actualising of every inward possibility, that unfolds the idea of individual being (58).

This desire to improve can transform into a desire to work, as the nothing of the lack is filled with work and a sense of busyness in order to quell anxiety. The cure can often be arrived to in haste as a need to progress seems urgent. This can manifest itself in everyday worries: 'Am I going to make this deadline?', 'Have I done this right?'. These worries are cyclical and constant, and mimic the toil in the Greek myth of Sisyphus.

Sisyphus was a notably cunning character within the Greek tradition, his imagination and foresight proving to be his downfall. He was condemned to ceaselessly push a large boulder up a hill, and upon completing this arduous mission with toil and determination, the rock would roll back down the hill through its own weight. He was to repeat this eternally, each time believing that his toil will end upon reaching the summit and his catharsis will be complete (Camus, 115).

My first point of interest within the myth is the mental state of Sisyphus as he completes each cycle - his naive and instinctual habitual compulsion to push the rock up the hill, always thinking that his toil will end once the rock reaches the summit, the horror as he watches it roll back down, and the amnesia he suffers each time the cycle continues.

The action of pushing an object requires a physical presence to enact a movement forward, to move an object from its current place in space, to an imagined future place with the will and determination to do so. Here the *push* evokes a sense of time, like that of the future temporality of the lack. Like observations of desire, Sisyphus is to constantly work towards a goal that has no foreseeable end to it, born out of a compulsion from nothing, with 'hard and frustrating labour.' (Camus, 115)

But in the end for Bloch, this desire, 'wish', 'hope' or 'work' is actually 'militant optimism carrying a mourning wreath, forced to proceed without any certainty of success' hoping 'there is still rescue, in the horizon.' (Körtner, 17)

Dara Gill

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