

frieze

Emily Wardill
SPACEEX, EXETER, UK



Emily Wardill,
Gamekeepers without Game
(2009), film still

La Vida es Sueño (Life is a Dream, 1635), the title of Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca's allegorical play and the basis for Emily Wardill's new

film *Gamekeepers without Game* (2009) shown at Spaceex, inverts into statement René Descartes' famous question: is life a dream? Curiously, *Discours de la méthode ...* (Discourse on the Method) was published just two years after Calderón's text – their dates and content hint at Wardill's predilection for mining the history of philosophy and literature.

Calderón's elaborate plot focuses on a young prince, secretly imprisoned by his father after hearing a prophecy that his son will grow up to be a cruel ruler. After the king admits that his son is alive, the prince is released, only to commit murder and attempt rape. He is promptly drugged, re-imprisoned and told he



dreamt his release. Wardill's version migrates the story to contemporary London and to a seventeen year-old girl, Stay, who lives in care after being put up for adoption at the age of eight by her parents, and her father's attempt to take her back into the family home.

If Wardill borrows Calderón's story, she steals Descartes' method. The film begins with the brute facts: 'We're in London. There are houses, windows, doors; two eyes, a nose a mouth, ears; some other stuff,' a young girl tells us. Shot in harsh monochrome, we see only the stripped-back material essentials – the characters, objects, pieces of furniture.

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Characters are introduced by their vital details: name, age, occupation. The soundtrack provided by an intermittent drum kit playing simple jazz rhythms only adds to this odd matter-of-fact-ness. The camera casts a lazy eye over the actors and a leering one over the design objects that flash into focus: contemporary remakes of Gerrit Rietveld-designed Z-shaped chairs; a Modernist modular seating unit; a concrete coffee table. Fragments of dialogue ranging from banal chit-chat on pet-hates to reflections on the process of



writing and storytelling from the perspective of an object well up from nothing and hang curiously unfinished. The camera, drummer and narrators all appear to have different agendas, occasionally harmonizing but more often do not: the camera lingers, the drumming cuts out and the voices move on, the strands of narrative diverging and re-forming somewhere else.

This refractive process, from the photo-montage of the design objects to the multiple narrators (with distinct tones and lexicons), is characteristic of Wardill's practice of re-figuring

the distributive possibilities of varying modes of communication. Like her previous films, such as *Sea Oak / The Diamond (Descartes' Daughter)* (2008), the formal aspect of the presentation is insisted upon, as are the theoretical references. These tightly methodological structures and dense constellations of ideas can prove austere and almost willfully opaque. *Gamekeepers Without Game* is certainly no break from Wardill's tendency to conceptual over-determination, but a trove of unlikely dualities – the collision of



statement with question, Calderón's morality play with Cartesian doubt, and the synthesis of experimentation and methodological rigor, atomization and narrative form – play out in a tightly interweaving story that though dreamlike in presentation and reference, contains motifs of human behaviour that seem all too real.

Paul Teasdale