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Emily Wardill

FOCUS

**Paranoia, hallucination and expectation;
making sense of hidden systems**

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Hamlet's famous advice to his mother – 'Assume a virtue, if you have it not' – packs in a wealth of philosophical questions about the divide between what we are conscious of (pretending to be virtuous) and what comes across (being virtuous). It's this silty ground between intent and actuality – the idea before it is put into action – that is the territory explored in the mosaic-like short films of London-based artist Emily Wardill. Works such as *Born Winged Animals* and *Honey Gatherers of the Soul* (2005) and *Basking in what feels like 'an ocean of grace', I soon realise that I'm not looking at it, but rather that I AM it, recognising myself* (2006) capture scenes of city life in brief, fixed point-of-view shots, setting these vignettes to the even tempos of a plodding piano or the ringing of church bells. The films cohere in visual rhythm, texture and style but give the impression that a complex meaning is being deliberately withheld. Wardill makes films, it seems, with instinctual talent, and the opacity of her work is both a measure of this and an inquiry into the degree to which we are conscious of our own behaviour – into how reality rubs against expectation.

Ben (2007), Wardill's most recent film, juxtaposes two psychological case studies: one used by Sigmund Freud to illustrate the idea of 'negative hallucination' (where a patient believes a room full of objects to be empty) and the other regarding a subject called Ben, used by American psychoanalysis students to understand the condition of paranoia. The first case is intoned by an actor assuming the voice of a hypnotist, while the other is haltingly read aloud

by a non-native English speaker (a favourite distancing mechanism of Jean-Luc Godard). Neither of these two strands is explicated visually. *Ben* is a colour film of a set made entirely of black and white props. Actors in theatrical face-paint and plumed hats perch by rickety Modernist tables, bare light bulbs and awkward stocky sculptures. The two narratives remain as separate as oil and water: Freud's melodrama and the hypnotist's voice-of-God narrative play off the unsteady reading and flat scientific jargon of the American study. The two stories intersect only at the end, where the name 'Ben' comes to designate the apparently non-existent object to be picked up by the hypnotized patient.

Arguably, *Ben* also enacts the paranoia and negative hallucination it describes; on watching the film the viewer's instinct is to conceptualize the existence of a relationship that is not visibly given. This is the logic that links the three strands of *Ben*: the two dissimilar narratives and the stylized actors and film set. And, as in cases of paranoia in which a system known only to the paranoiac gives meaning to apparently random configurations of events, the logic of *Ben* remains known only to the artist. Even in the less elaborate film *Basking in what feels like an 'ocean of grace'...*, Wardill hides clues; the film's piano soundtrack, for example, was generated so that the musical score would look symmetrical when transcribed to sheet music, playing forwards and then backwards. How does this come across when it is included in the film? Can the viewer ever know about this system just from watching the film?

This isn't a criticism leveled against the work; it's a question Wardill anticipates. It is precisely this potential obfuscation and transfiguration of meaning, through the processes of communication, that she seeks to explore. Wardill's work, *Sea Oak*, scheduled to be completed this autumn, addresses how people understand information better when set in narrative form – with the specific example of the US Democratic party, who are revising their campaign presentations to incorporate narrative and melodrama, and gain some of the rhetorical force recently monopolized by Republicans. The final section of *Basking in what feels like 'an ocean of grace'...* features a focus group, filmed without sound and through a window. How is information given? Is it paid for, set into a narrative or represented visually? And how is it received? The focus group's 'exemplary' opinions become symbolic of life in a city, refracted into images whose meaning is based on both structure and assumption.

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