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Review - Emily Wardill, *carlier* | gebauer

By Pablo Larios

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Emily Wardill, *When You Fall into a Trance*, 2013, video still

Ian Waterman was a patient without medical precedent: after waking up one day unable to move his body, Waterman lived as though cast in a case. The teenage apprentice butcher eventually trained himself to move again by visualizing each motion in advance, slowly re-attaching body to mind. He was forced to choreograph his own gestures, living in ‘a kind of performance’, as a 1998 BBC documentary, *The Man Who Lost His Body*, described it. His is now an exemplary study for proprioception, or the correspondence between kinesthesia and cognition.

Emily Wardill likely borrowed directly from the scenes in this BBC documentary, in which Waterman re-enacts his initial attempts at movement, for the opening shots of her feature-length film *When You Fall into a Trance* (2013). Wardill’s aproprioceptive subject, Simon, lies on the ground, struggling to lift his head, as the film’s narrator tells us: ‘This is Simon. He can’t move his body without looking at it, so if you turn out the lights in the room he falls over.’

Combining the histrionics of family melodrama with philosophical allegory, *When You Fall into a Trance* is a discursively rich, technically ambitious investigation of the mind-body problem. If the theme sounds abstract, we should remember her subject is precisely that – the way abstraction (a general rule, a mind) relates to the particular (a case, a body). The film, like an Iris Murdoch novel, absolves and enacts this via a lush abstraction and through the crystallization of highly metaphorical characters. It centres on Dominique, a neurologist studying Simon and his loss of bodily feedback. The professorial Dominique works late, enacting clinical and cerebral entrapment, while also being haunted by the loss of her husband, and eventually turning to online dating. The voice-over is interspersed with case studies about cognition (including someone who is unable to recognize the same person photographed from different angles); while the images comprise slow, organic and visually entrancing sequences of two, slow-moving synchronized swimmers in a pool (one of whom is Tony, Dominique’s daughter). For these recurring, terpsichorean shots, where water takes on the grain of obsidian, Wardill’s camera is often half-submerged, recording the spillage and trickle of light onto surfaces and floors. These segments alternate with dialogue-heavy interior scenes, where mellifluously accented characters struggle to connect, provoking and hurting each other with awkward, sexualized phrases or inane everyday misunderstandings.

These interior scenes were inspired in part by André Kertész’s black and white mirror photographs (*Distortion #92* and *#91*, both 1933), where female bodies meld into reflected blobs. Kertész’s photographs were included in ‘I hear your voice reflected in a glass and it sounds like it is inside of me’, a concurrent group exhibition also at the gallery, which Wardill conceived while researching her film, in conversation with Jesi Khadivi. To create these distorted sequences, Wardill installed curved mirrors in domestic interiors and filmed them so that we see the reflections, angles and distensions – as if of the characters’ egos – along actors’ bodies in a room. The visuals are as stunning as the scenes of water.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

49 GEARY ST, *ste.* 416 SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108

tel: 415.576.9300 / *fax:* 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

They superimpose space with psychology, disrupting it while also obviating the austerity of Wardill's, at times weighty, allegorical constructs (Freudian metaphors of 'surface' and 'depth' are too simply read into the swimming scenes.) In the other direction, Wardill tends to make errant narrative jumps that are neither realistic nor oneiric, such as introducing one of the characters as a spy, or the lyrical voice-over narrating Tony's 'blood dripping [...] through her hair, and falling 20 feet below'. While striking and Keats-like, I'm not convinced the film needs these lines: Wardill's visuals alone often say more.

While the film floats within an unanswerable, if buoyant, phenomenological question, it repeatedly makes headway on ethical ones: the over-application of logical principles to the point of cruelty (as when one character offends another by assuming that she is pregnant because she does not drink). The film effectively presents not only the metaphysical rift between mind and body, but also – perhaps more compellingly – the ethical gap between individuals. Toward the end, we see a research demonstration wherein Dominique instructs Simon to narrate and gesticulate a sequence from a familiar cartoon. But because he can only move while watching his own body, when he is asked to repeat the same while housed in a box-like construction blocking his vision, his arms fail to correspond to his narration. Simon describes: 'He does what characters do: he runs away from it the same way, in the direction the truck is driving, instead of stepping to the side.' I have a hunch that here Wardill is describing her own case, her own narrative boxes, knowing she could perhaps gain even more from stepping outside them, deliberate and poignant as they are.

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http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_back/emily-wardill/