

Mary Mary

BLACK, KARLA; TRANSMISSION EXHIBITION REVIEW TEXT

Torsten Lauschmann at Transmission Nov 6th – December 4th 2004 reviewed by Karla Black

If that is what is there then that is what there is.
Reality seems better than Fantasy for Torsten Lauschmann

Being outside at night in open country can feel confining. Such a particular sense of containment is caused by conditions that give no understanding of the distance between a person and the next nearest thing. In this circumstance it may be necessary to wonder, 'Is anything there?'

In the absence of both moonlight and stars, darkness can act like surrounding walls. The more extreme a perceived lack, in this case of any other physical entity, the more likely the imagination is to invent a substitute. It takes time for eyes to adjust to darkness in order to be able to pick out objects that may be around: a tree? a path?, and to notice if surroundings are vast and empty, and edges and limits only imagined.

Light is what is needed. Even a single beam of light would separate things out and reveal an environment for what it really is. To shine a light into darkness is like waking from a dream because, in that moment, the conscious mind eclipses the unconscious, order takes charge of chaos and, as a result, to a certain extent, culture overcomes nature. It is probably more difficult to feel ok alone outside in a field in the dark than inside an enclosed lit room. At times, however, the former may be required.

A baby's creativity develops as it begins to be able to provide itself with imagined feeding and purring at moments of lack. This "recreation of the good object" is one psychoanalytic theory for the origins of art-making in the mind. Throughout art history there has been a tendency to use nature as it manifests itself in landscape as representative of psychological states. A wilderness could signal madness, anxiety or confusion, while the empty or overwhelming can stand for loneliness, sadness or insignificance.

Just inside the entrance to Transmission gallery a facing wall has been built, forcing a left turn through a narrow constructed doorway covered by a black curtain. It is dark in there, apart from light that emanates from three video projections. One takes up almost the whole of the long right hand wall. Another is about the size of a standard, traditional landscape painting, while the third, in the distance of the back left corner, is small and high up. A little extra light comes into the room from the office space at the back. There is also the sound of wind and the feeling of it blowing, meaning that almost all of the senses are involved. It is necessary to just stand for a bit in the middle to realise that, up to a point, individual objects can be picked out. The overall experience, however, seems more like being inside something than just looking on. This is not the usual situation of the individual looking at the thing: a person with objects at distances from it. And yet it is not an installation either. There are four pieces of work in the exhibition with four different titles, but somehow these are all part of one another either actually, as in physically and technically, or conceptually.

Stopping in the middle, then, and turning to the right, there is intermittent sound somewhere behind me or beside me. A few feet ahead are what look like trees made from branches that are taped onto the gallery pillars. On the wall in front are their shadows cutting off fair portions either side of a projected film. This whole, layered thing is called "A Lover Waits For Good Times". The film cuts slowly between different scenes of landscapes. Some are empty and windy. In one scene, eventually, there is a small, solitary man on a bike, while in another the attention is drawn to a very big tree that is either dead or has shed its leaves. Somewhere there is a shingley, wintry small beach or inlet. In other scenes there is, in contrast, a sunny and leafy green wood, in which a young man and woman frolic and picnic in Edwardian dress. In all of the shots the camera is still so that movement exists only within the frame. The gallery pillar "trees" and their shadows move because fans that are part of another piece of work are blowing air around.

A person seems small compared to these big projected landscapes. This experience combined with the various scenes and the title brings thoughts of waiting, of emptiness and loneliness. Or maybe of just nothing, albeit punctuated at times by more pleasant feelings. The good times are, however, in terms of the number of scenes, disproportionate to the others. Even when they are here dark shadows are present. And there is nothing to be done about this because control lies elsewhere; because that is just the way it is.

Sadness, though, is not allowed to be a conclusion. Because isn't there actually the possibility of equal pleasure, more even, just of a different type, in watching the empty, dingy landscape or the big dead tree, as there is in watching the happy picnickers? And isn't that because we know that their happiness is only partially real. Theirs is romantic, ideal happiness. And the danger of the romantic is that it lies not only in the idealistic but also in it's opposite, the paranoid. With waiting, it becomes clear that the summer scenes are extracted from a feature film, and are therefore acted: this is a pretence, a façade. It is more difficult to tell whether the other scenes have been taken from existing films or made by the artist himself. Taken at traditional, metaphorical face value, some of the empty scenes are also extreme. Such vast, overwhelming lack could suggest paranoia. Separated, both types of scenes are pure fantasy, but spliced together like this they begin to come close to some kind of reality of experience. This balance or inclusiveness of opposites gives this work layers of steady, unfolding maturity and depth. Pleasure becomes embedded in the whole.

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Is the real actually Nature in all its known manifestations? As the powerful controller of our physical lives through landscape and weather, as the unpredictable force in other people that impacts on our emotional and psychological world, and as the process that drives our creativity. To favour reality over fantasy then, a person or author or artist must show themselves to have chosen to be somewhat at the mercy of all of these things.

Torsten's exhibition at Transmission was not limited to the presentation of his own work in the upstairs gallery. On Friday nights and Saturday afternoons throughout the month, he screened films – a total of twenty including, for example, works by Werner Herzog, Hans Richter and Samuel Beckett. These screenings took place in the gallery basement, where two live soundtracks he had commissioned were also played. On the opening night of his exhibition, Torsten organised a re-enactment of Dieter Roth, Gerhard Rühm and Oswald Wiener's 1973 performance 'Selten Gehörte Musik'. There was a large collection of musical instruments lying in the basement, and participants were asked to play those that they had no proficiency in. They performed together in "an aesthetic of embarrassment, blame and abstention". Torsten relinquished control first by recreating a work by other artists, and then by staking its outcome or success on others who had absolutely no idea what they were doing. The music wasn't always "good" but then it wasn't supposed to be. It was, as it should have been, painful and difficult in order to show, as it did at points, how really beautiful moments can emerge from such conditions.

When reality, or the representational, is included in artwork, there is inevitably something there that cannot then be controlled. There is more of such imagery in the part-film, part-wall painting "Mother And Child". Its relationship to painting goes beyond the area of gold on the wall that outlines and then glows in a solid rectangle above its subjects – Torsten's girlfriend Cathy and their baby son Jammy who is, at the point of filming, just a few weeks old. Both are asleep, lying on a single bed against a wall, with an abstract painting hung above their heads. Cathy's arm supports Jammy. He is in a nappy and she is wearing a vest and pants. This as a historic subject is recognised by either having been transformed or just naturally appearing somehow mediaeval and modern at the same time, religious and transcendental, yet ordinary and everyday. Unlike the old painters, Torsten hasn't romanticised his subjects aesthetically, making it all the more obvious that there really is no need, since reality is so miraculous and joyful here. As he watches over them, they are unaware of being looked at and therefore unselfconscious, or natural even. The image at first seems still like a photograph or a painting, and then it becomes clear that the woman and baby are moving and breathing while asleep. The gold seems to get more intense as more time is spent with it, emphasised by the projected beam of light. All aestheticisation is contained within the formality of composition, colour and shape – the painting on the wall, the sculptural pile of arm, head, bedclothes, head...

Mother and Child, as a subject, remains almost primitive, in that its mysteries, while remaining the same through time can never be explained. There is something about this exhibition that seems to suggest, through nudges to points in history, that there are things, probably the most important things, that do not change come what may. Regularly, there are cultural, political and technological shifts, as well continual, superficial pendulum swings from the Classical to the Romantic and back again. One is only the opposite of the other, and so this exhibition puts forward instead the liveable, philosophical middle.

The smallest projection looks like a broken up and flattened out rubic cube, with blurred prismatic images of a couple chasing butterflies, in rainbows of high key Technicolor, contained within black lines that make sections inside it. Its title is "Suburbia in 3D: Chasing Butterflies". This looks really fantastical and unreal, and so is also somehow a bit alarming; kind of visually difficult to take. The prismatic colours are like a broken tv, the geometric shape jarring. Whatever the technique, it is impressive. It seems like a brand new invention. Chasing butterflies like this would surely be an amazingly unbelievable good time. Is it then the type of experience that should be striven towards? It looks miraculous but it is so high key that it is almost trippy, like a hallucination, and there is therefore something of madness in it, or at least of high anxiety. It was probably in the 1960s or 70s, at the height of experimentation with drugs like LSD, that young people realised for sure that suburbia was too good to be true and the children of a hopeful consumerist 50s generation started dropping acid.

It is hard for me to think about the fourth piece of work: "Composition For 3 Desk Fans" as an autonomous thing in itself, since it can't be experienced in isolation unless I close my eyes. It seems, rather, that it is ingrained in the show: an integral part of how the whole thing reveals its workings, or of how the entire experience unravels. Three desk fans are taped to pillars by their bases, so that they face upwards towards the ceiling and blow the air in that direction as they move from side to side. Microphones dangle down from the tops of the pillars by their black leads to almost touch the white metal mesh casing of the fans, amplifying the sound of the blowing air.

This exhibition, including as it did all of this work plus its extensions in terms of the performance and film screenings, felt vast and bottomless, like it had no edges or limits. It was big.

Is the only way to not be fully at the mercy of something bigger and more powerful to give in to it, or at least accept it as a separate entity that cannot be totally directed? Is this how Torsten could undertake such a sprawling project? If, in reality as opposed to fantasy, some control is always given away, what or who is the thing to which it is given? Is it Nature? Only if Nature means not just landscape and weather but other people and the artistic process too.

Karla Black 2005