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BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
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# Chaos Theory

With their narrative and perceptual slippages, the films of Emily Wardill deal in condensation and complication



It is rare to see a box of Quality Street chocolates juxtaposed with a pig's trotter; as rare, perhaps, as witnessing a teenager in spots dressed as a killer whale having a panic attack. Familiarity and logic are, however, thin on the ground in Emily Wardill's films. Generally speaking, the London-based artist wrestles with languages – visual, cinematic, verbal, musical – not in order to control them but to free them up, as if non-sequiturs or logistical leaps and slippages are closer to the way we process information than the demarcations of conventional logic we more often rely on. This is not to say that her films make no sense – they do, but in a very strange way. They are the least predictable things I have seen in a long time.

The ambition of Wardill's work is exhilarating; it is so chock-full of startlingly inventive scenes and arcane references that trying to understand them on first viewing is akin to a skydiver trying to grasp the history of the world from leaping from the plane and landing. The first work I saw by Wardill, *Born Winged Animals and Honey Gatherers of the Soul* (2005), is just under nine minutes long. It opens on a black screen to a soundtrack of bells from the Hawksmoor-designed St Anne's Church, East London, striking noon. Wardill made the film in response to the preface to Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887): "We are unknown to ourselves, we seekers of knowledge, even to ourselves [...] much as a divinely distracted, self-absorbed person into whose ear the bell has just boomed it's 12 strokes of noon suddenly awakens and wonders, "what did it actually toll just now?" so we rub our ears afterwards and ask, "what did we actually experience just now?" still more: "who are we actually?" After about two minutes the darkness lifts and the film segues into everyday images of East London – a child playing, a woman sitting in the sun. *Born Winged Animals ...* is an early, relatively tentative indicator of the increasingly extreme direction the artist's work has taken. Fascinated by the intermingling of perception and psychology, both of her next films – the eight-minute *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) and the ten-minute *Ben* (2007) – examine focus groups, hypnosis and psychological case studies. However, as the first title suggests, her films are closer to reveries and hallucinations than to straight documentaries. Representation here is as unstable as the thing, person or place it's representing – even the title of *Basking ...* is borrowed from a website about dream interpretation.



*Ben*, 2007, 16mm film stills. All images courtesy: Aliman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco; Fortscape Avenue / Jonathan Viner, London; STANDARD (OSLO), and the artist.

Music's 'ability to convey ideas that by-pass rational thoughts' is central for Wardill? To a soundtrack of insistent, repetitive piano, syncopated drumming and occasional hand-claps, composed by the artist and which inverts at the precise middle-point of the film, *Basking ...* opens to a black screen which dissolves into a kaleidoscopic nightscape of abstracted reflections and an empty nightclub, and then into scenes of women talking in a group. The only sound we hear, though, is the music. Wardill believes that restricting access to the words of the women: 'offers them a sense of dignity because the actual specifics of their conversation are not available [...] the romance of the language contrasts with the reality of its depiction [...] Their expression without sound makes us more aware of the gesture – both their gestures and the gesture of listening itself.'<sup>1</sup>

In *Ben* a young woman aware of the resture to a case history about paranoia studied by American psychology students – it concerns *Ben*, a 52-year-old man, who 'may be using hallucinogenic drugs'. The voice of a male hypnotist intoning Sigmund Freud's concept of 'negative hallucination' – the suggestion to a hypnotized subject that he or she cannot see a person or thing when they wake up – interrupts this first narrative. As if empathetically mirroring his behaviour, Wardill adopts a counter-intuitive, even schizophrenic, approach to portraying *Ben*: the set – a room decorated with patterns and banners, lights, beer cans and furniture – is painted black and white but filmed in colour, while the actors, who are dressed in fantastical costumes, are shot in black and white; it's as if the Venice Carnival has been transported to an inner-city squat. Occasionally, the screen turns abruptly black or white. As with all of Wardill's films, the experience of watching *Ben* is not an easy one; perception, the film implies, and the assumptions we bring to it, should never – especially when it comes to how we understand our fellow human beings – be passive.

Disruption and dislocation are also central to *Sick Serena* and *Dregs and Dregs* and *Wrecks and Wrecks* (2007). (The title came to Wardill on a trip to Cuba when she saw graffiti that read 'Sex and Drugs and Rock and Rock'.) *Sick Serena ...* was inspired, in various degrees, by Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1962 short film *La ricotta* (which stars Orson Welles as Pasolini directing the Passion of Christ – it resulted in the director being arrested for being in contempt of state religion), the writings of John Ruskin ('a rainbow is painted on a shower of melted glass'), and the role of allegory and moralizing in medieval stained glass. The result is more absurd, visually rich and funny than all of this might imply: Wardill uses her sources less as footnotes than as tools to assist her in the carving of something unarguably new. Once again, she built an elaborate set but in this case black lines – like the divisions in stained glass windows – delineate the stage. To a soundtrack that combines church music with contemporary drumming, the dialogue swerves abruptly between quotation and bizarre invention. 'What are you thinking about?' asks a child. 'A giant bollock that could be used as a space-hopper,' replies the Christ-like figure. The film's focus moves rapidly between the fragmented beauty of the windows – designed, of course, to communicate political and religious rhetoric to an illiterate society – and the mannered, stuttering actors (one repeatedly echoes the words of another). In a sense, Wardill's take on her subject is not unlike someone throwing a rock through a window and then repairing it with great care. *Sick Serena ...* functions both as an homage to earlier forms of creativity and a protest against vital forms of communication being treated as something static or nostalgic; a reiteration that the function of beauty is never neutral.

Wardill's next two films, *Sea Oak* (2008) and *The Diamond* (Descartes' Daughter) (2008) – which the artist requests be shown together – push the possibilities of representation even further, paradoxically by highlighting its limitations. The 51-minute *Sea Oak* is based on a short story by George Saunders published in 2000, which is titled after a housing estate: 'At Sea Oak there's no sea and no oak, just a hundred subsidized apartments and a rear view of FedEx.'<sup>2</sup> The film is a 51-minute projection of blackness. Highlighting the slippage between words and the things they represent, only the projector – the conveyor, here, of language rather than images – is illuminated in the darkened gallery space. It is accompanied by edited recordings of interviews that Wardill conducted with a left-wing Californian think tank, The Rockridge Institute, which researched the employment of metaphor and framing in contemporary political rhetoric – making the work a natural sequel to *Sick Serena ...*. The film (only about three percent of which is from sources other than Wardill's interviews) begins with the voice of an American man discussing the ways in which we think in prototypes before analyzing how language conjures disparate, subjective images – something exploited, of course, by politicians. According to Wardill: 'I realized after I'd shot the footage that the film had to have no image, because if it had an image I would be completely undoing everything that I was talking about.'<sup>3</sup>



*Game Keepers Without Game*, 2009, DVD stills.

*The Diamond* (Descartes' Daughter) opens with an image of a dark room illuminated by a flickering green laser that echoes the broken narrative to follow. The voice of a disembodied, young, Swedish-accented woman declares: 'This is a stand-in for Francine, Descartes' daughter who never washed up on the shores of Sweden. She is a 12-year old girl playing a Nintendo Wii under a strobe light and dressed in the costume that Étienne-Jules Marey dressed his subjects when conducting chronophotography. I ask her "do you remember a scene from a film of a diamond protected by lasers." For the next 15 minutes personal anecdotes, references to history, philosophy and film mingle into a crazily hybrid, oddly compelling tale loosely structured around the apocryphal story of Descartes' construction of an automaton modeled on his beloved, dead daughter, and the artist's attempt to re-create a half-remembered film scene featuring a diamond protected by lasers. Also referenced are Lawrence Weiner's 1968 Declaration of Intent and popular thrillers; they intertwine like the bit-players in a Postmodern fairy-tale in freefall. Apart from a few moments – an ethereal green-lit face and hands, a diamond – *The Diamond* (Descartes' Daughter) is relentlessly abstract and verbally discursive. If history is an attempt to recall events, people or places beyond our reach, the past becomes as speculative as the future.

About a year ago, Wardill read an essay by Norman Mailer in which the novelist and essayist calls for a new naturalism in contemporary fiction to win back readers who had become dislocated and felt abandoned. This chimed with Wardill, who decided to write a script for a melodrama – 'a combination of melody and drama',<sup>4</sup> as she put it – which would be her most straightforward film yet and which she would 'shoot like airline food [...]' so you have this sense that everything is separate and nothing ever touches.<sup>5</sup> The result is *Game Keepers Without Game* (2009). With its linear narrative, it could be viewed as Wardill's most conventional film. Linearity, though, is about far as convention goes; the film is wildly imaginative, biting satirical, full of a kind of astonishment in surfaces, textures and character and accompanied by an unsettling drum soundtrack as insistent and irregular as a heart about to suffer an attack.

The script is based on *La Vida es Sueño* (Life is a Dream, 1635), Spanish poet and dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play about a prince who has been secretly imprisoned by his father after hearing a prophecy that his son will grow up to be a brutal ruler. After the king admits to his subjects that his son is alive, he is allowed to leave prison but, when he commits acts of violence, is drugged, re-imprisoned and told that his release had been a dream. For *Game Keepers Without Game*, Wardill transposes the story to contemporary London: a middle-class father – a writer, 'interested in hybridity' – who is filled with remorse at putting up his schizophrenic daughter up for care when she was eight, tries to reintegrate her (she is now 17 and working as a prostitute) back into the family, with tragic results.

With its white monochrome background, convincing acting and exquisitely shot still lifes of furniture, design classics, art and books, *Game Keepers Without Game* could be classed as a minimalist horror movie. Stay, the daughter reintroduced into the home, holds the family hostage with her anger and psychosis (smashing, for example, a Gregory Roberts teapot with a copy of Roland Barthes' 1980 book *Aracomboldo*) before killing her father with an axe – the only time we see a human touch an object. In an echo of the instability being described, one of the narrators checks herself, re-reads words and struggles with her lines. Accents diverge – Stay's is working class, whereas her father's is cultivated, European. They are so baffled by each other as they are curious. 'I work with words,' says the father. Stay replies: 'What do you mean your work with words? Words just come into your head; trust me.' Although Stay ostensibly murders her father because she has failed to take her anti-psychotic medication, the implication hovers that the real culprit is class – its divisions continue to demarcate (and disorientate) contemporary British society.

The themes that Wardill returns to again and again are all here: that communication is complicated and representation even more so; that, despite our cultural sophistication, language is a minefield of nuance, politics and imprecision; that imaginations are resolutely individual and often enigmatic. A thin vein of controlled chaos pulses beneath the elegant surface of *Game Keepers Without Game*; contemporary culture, it would seem, can barely control the tenuous hold it has on the often fraught relationship between words and things, surfaces and souls. To keep it in check involves, of course, multiple compromises. By the end credits, the question hovers: which ones should we choose?

Emily Wardill's solo show at de Appel Boys' school (Eerste Jacob van Campenstraat 59) runs until 28 November 2010.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

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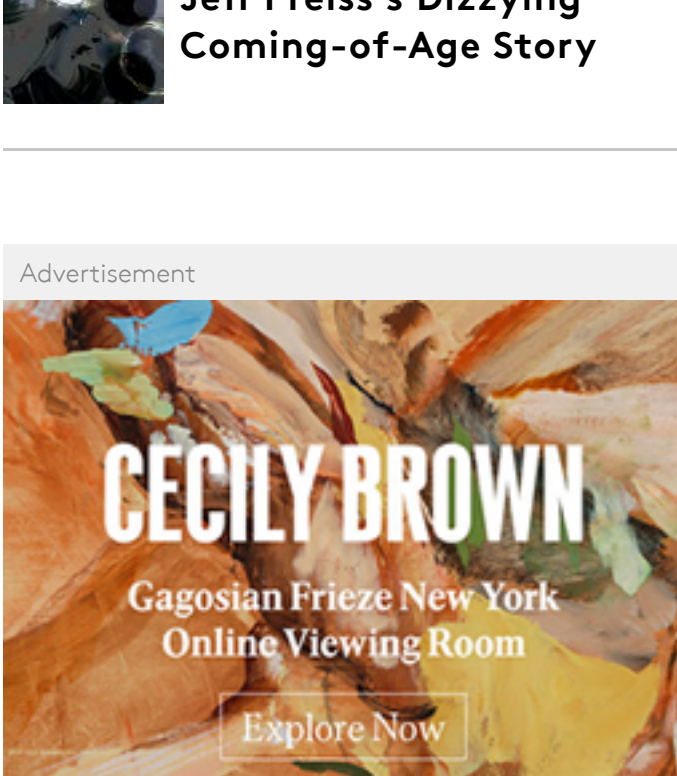
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