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Marking Time, Duration as Subject: *Tony Woods Archive* by Andrew Gaynor (ed.)
I like boring things. When you sit and look out of a window, that's enjoyable. It takes up time. Yeah. Really, you see people looking out of their window all the time. I do. If you're not looking out of a window, you're sitting in a shop looking at the street. (1)

Tony Woods: Archive, edited by Andrew Gaynor and published locally in 2013, records the durability of the artist's primary painting practice, for which he has accrued a level of prestige over many years and changes of circumstance. The publication also registers his filmmaking activities, ranging through super 8 and video, as well as his neglected sound recordings. In addition, quality sampled images from his extensive painting practice, a DVD and an introductory essay by the artist are included. Writing by Sheridan Palmer, Gary Willis, Lesley Chow, Alex Selentisch, Phil Edwards and Jake Wilson all add some critical meat to this publication. Palmer, Chow and Selentisch concentrate on Woods’ initial painting practice, whilst Wilson comments on Woods’ artisanal filmmaking. Edwards, meanwhile, discusses his sound field recordings and Willis offers more historical perspective.

Approaching through cinema, in this age of the curator Woods’ Archive seems dedicated to the notion of “duration that Peter Gidal’s Materialist Film brought to cinema internationally. Like Woods, Gidal entered British alternative cinema through Abstract Expressionism, as a refugee from Warhol’s New York, where Gidal had been associated with The Factory. Woods’ New York connection has him as an emergent Australian painter and prestigious Harkness Fellow hosting Clement Greenberg in Hobart in 1968 before his own two years in New York. Gary Willis identifies this period as critical to Woods’ practice, marking his shift into abstraction through Abstract Expressionism, from which Woods returns to Australia in shock due to the imposed Minimalism of the legendary burn-out of his New York Studio, a visceral body-centred Terra Nullius moment, reeling back to Oz via his Sydney period and a continuing relationship with Brett Whitely to eventually land in inner city Melbourne, where he is still settled.
Viewable through post-punk, Woods’ homecoming in a state of abstracted catatonia is the most worthy aesthetic return to the outskirts of the main game of any Australian artist. Woods comes back into a colonial place, his cultural cringe roots, to inhabit and amplify the immediacy of everyday life at the margins. Uncannily, it is a situation in sync with those conscripted men returning from the Vietnam War. Willis states, “the fire that for a brief moment threatened to engulf him, has burnt a black hole of self-doubt into Tony’s psyche.” (p.50) Through persistence and resilience this knock in the teeth has enabled, perhaps forced, Woods to construct a durable practice in exquisitely invisible form, evidenced and revealed in this publication. There is something of Gidal’s attitude in this, but in typical Oz double negative form. As Gidal puts it:

I would like to make a film that is at one and the same time a film in its own right and as explication of the mechanisms of its own making. Thus the film would be both about something and about itself. I have been making films that fall into this concept since 1967. (2)

Woods’ Carringbush work registers the light and its forms entering his local studio and his films surveil laneways in the studio’s vicinity. This 230 page book materialises for the coffee tables of “Fitzroyalty” Woods’ invisible reflections, generally perceived as background noise for the pre-occupied professional elite, who have moved into the artist-gentrified inner suburbs for prestige and lifestyle choice. Edwards notes that in his sound recordings “Woods is deliberately observing, listening, noticing, collating, and filing audio experiences that may go unnoticed by the same communities other inhabitants.” (p. 92) This comes close to ASIO’s brief, but for aesthetic rather than political purposes.
My own intro into Woods’ practice, as is probably already apparent from this review’s beginning, has been through cinema, through the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group screenings and his attendance at the Café Bohemio events in Smith Street, Fitzroy, where he could see the aesthetics of his painting practice animated by American contemporaries like Robert Breer and Pat O’Neill. In retrospect the MS8FG was the site of many equal voices, in which Wood’s persistence and application flourished. At times it seems there was too much Tony Woods at the MS8FG Open Screenings, an effect delivered by Woods’ specific use of duration, often at aesthetic odds to the more punch abstraction and storytelling from other participants.

Woods’ surveillance cinema on both VHS video and super 8 was mainly constructed through in-camera edits, registering cats, spiders and sleeping drug addicts from his studio window, the lost moments and lyricism of everyday observation. There is also a thread of experimenting with light and reflection caught on walls and windows, all tempered by Tony’s considered eye. I remember one sequence that demonstrated this for me, a sequence of birds on a power line, suggestively framed like a musical score. Tony allows such moments to develop through a duration alien to a narrative cinema of speed and movement. His use of technology contains this straightforward attitude: “I made recordings just for the sake of it. I do not use a computer to make my DVDs or CDs, just recorders.” (p. 14)

This is observational work that refrains from technology’s bells and whistles. Woods puts the apparatus in dumb service to his eye and ear. Dumb service here signifies the silence and social invisibility with which Woods inoffensively stalks his subject, recording a Fitzroy in transition from student accommodation to prestige location.

A visit to his studio – where we showed Howard Guttenplan a bunch of local films in the 1990s – revealed the large expanding archive of paintings stored there and the Spartan, solitary and simple existence that had produced it, a practice caringly supported by his ex-wife and loving daughters, Stellar and Clea.

Edwards points to a relationship between Woods’ paintings and recordings. (p. 92) One can make the same observation about all his uses of technology, although they remain compartmentalized from each other in the practice itself. For Woods himself “I rely on film and video to handle reality as my paintings become more abstract.” (p.14)

There was a period during the nineties-era Café Bohemio screenings (organised by Vikki Riley, Marcus Bergner and myself) that Tony Woods went missing, having had a heart attack and ending up in hospital, I believe. That he has added another sustained period of practice to his long line of creativity for a further 20 years is a measure of his resilience. Certainly there is not enough written about Australian experimental practice in any critical vein. In this regard, this welcome compilation of word and image allows us to think seriously and respectfully about Tony Woods’ contribution.


Endnotes

2. Peter Gidal, “Proposal for Room Film submitted to BFI October 1973”, in British Film and Video Artist’s Study Collection (St Martin’s School of Art, London), p. 1.

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