

Anne Finegan

*PELT: Modernist Aesthetics in the moving image*

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Two recent works at Pelt, a stylish new addition to Sydney's gallery scene, foreground time-based and electronic arts within the evolution of the modernist tradition. The monochrome has far from gone away but has continued to develop in innovative new forms of moving-image and digital painting. Further, in acknowledging that experimental film had certainly paved the way for the next wave of digital works, Pelt has, to date, provided a skilfully curated programme [Caleb Kelly, William Noble and Peter Blamey] which draws out the links.

Virginia Hilyard's {In the Depths} is a re-installation and recuperation of an early 1980s work, which, despite its re-edition in digital format, conserves its original experimental film aesthetic. Grounded in non-narrative practice the focus is, to borrow a phrase from noted experimental film-maker Stan Brakhage, about opening to vision.

Hilyard's practice incorporates hand held camera footage, mixed with techniques of hand-painting directly onto filmstock. Lisyak, by contrast, works with computers and digital decay. Yet, both artists, whose work, incidentally, was not exhibited together but on separate occasions, are similarly concerned with direct manipulation and investigation of their mediums, rather than mimesis. In this respect both artists are working within the tradition of an expanded modernism.

Lisyak's {Dying Everyday } subjects a perfect square of projected monochrome pink light to the high pure tone of a sine wave soundtrack. Simultaneously the perfect curve of the sine wave could be said to sound alongside. You might only hear it, but you also can't help but imagine the characteristic clean contours of the graphic of sine wave pitch. Over time both sound and image submit to a process of decay and fuzzification. Imagine a Rothko panel in pink disintegrating through an evolution of sonic registers towards a white noise aesthetic.

Lisyak, therefore, never strays from the modernist paradigm, marshalling decay within the confines of two dimensions of modernism's flat pictorial plane. Sound marks out a third dimension of time without any muddying of the painterly medium.. The work, even though time-based, has little to do with cinematic paradigms and, instead, more directly references sound and abstract art, recalling the performance of Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore playing a guitar to accompany the 'sound' of a painting. {Dying Everyday} reconstitutes itself over and over again; the quale, or skin-thin surface of trembling pink light regularly disintegrating through sound's sub-particulate vibration before being restored to its pristine luminous frame.

Hilyard's film proves an absorbing contrast to Lisyak's paradoxically moving still frame. Instead, Hilyard takes the camera for a walk, like the Situationists, composing as she goes, though perhaps not in the same spirit of charting an entire trajectory or itinerary. Her intent is no Situationist psychogeography, but, instead painting as a mode of an aesthetics of continuity. Non-narrative, non-representational, her aim is not to reproduce some scene, person or object - or even to record the fleeting composition of her individual itinerary. Such concerns are foreclosed into a series of actions of 'travelling through' or 'towards' as the trajectory of the camera unfolds through a series of carefully composed formalist frames and architectures.

Her project is thus not to be confounded with Bill Viola's moving still lives in which representation is still the core issue [recall one of Bill Viola's wittier takes on 'still life' in which a clock ticks away on a vestibule while the painting on the walls shifts through a sunset in its modulations from day into night]. Instead, Hilyard strictly limits what the camera frames; like Lisyak her focus is on painterly qualities like lustre and light.

In the Depths thus enters into a certain conversation of cinema-without-narrative, a cinema abstracted from concerns of plot or character, in which the camera is an independent cine-eye, nothing more than an organ of perception through which to extract cinematic modes of image-reception. Her concern is to explore the language of time-based imagery, for example, that of pure affect,

taking the emotional tone of passing through the lustre of a chandelier-lit corridor, in incidental homage to the walk through sumptuous Baroque passages which opened Alan Resnais' *Last Year At Marienbad*}..

Or, indulging in the sensuous quality of the lush and yielding deep greens of the high-walled hedges of a maze, she yields to the camera to release the painterly traces of a Watteau gardenscape.

As Deleuze pointed out in respect of cinema, considered from the point of view of a moving image , we enter into an entirely different set of relations with what we see, especially if one is taking into account the camera-eye's own vectorial motion. When the camera wanders through the close-contact walls of Hilyard's high green maze, it is extracting a set of abstracted and painterly qualities of 'walking through green'. In other words the peripatatic

Indeed, her camera's passage through the maze less references the famous maze pursuit in the climax of Kubrick's masterpiece,{*The Shining*}, than more accurately reflecting the tricycle-ride across the distinctly wierd 1970s pattern in the carpet of the hotel's corridors. Kubrick might have placed the child on a tricycle, with each suspenseful turn perhaps reckoning with the ghosts of the two scary sisters, but it's the ride itself, turning across those patterns, through tight squared off corridors, that resonates in Hilyard's turns through the maze. If Kubrick had us up close to the pattern, child's tricycle height, our noses in it, Hilyard holds the camera at a similar distance pushing us into the yielding sides of the hedge, at times so close that our camera-eye blurs into an undulating Impressionistic green.

Upsetting the ratios of speed and distance, even at the pace of everyday walking is enough to put our cine-eye out of focus; the camera positioned, a little too close, face-in to the walls, is enough to temporarily put our perceptual systems out of whack, and transform the action of walking past into the fleeting action of eye-painting. Hilyard has hit those perceptual shifts which Deleuze refers to as "immanent relations," of speed and slowness.

As such, Hilyard's practice confirms that vectorial relations are at the heart of the moving-image experience: the speed of the camera intersecting with the perceptual system, and this, in turn, has the potential to generate relations of affect. The camera increases the range of our perceptive powers, and what it captures can then, in turn, release new aspects of vision and correlative sensations.

The passing drift of car lights by night, a favourite motif of Bill Viola, revives the effect of the lustre which had so charmed Walter Benjamin as he strolled through the arcades of Paris, lit by the novelty of electricity, at the turn of the century. Hilyard, too, takes her aesthetic cue from the figure of the flaneur - out for a walk, out for enjoyment, for the pleasures a seemingly casual stroll will bring. However, rather than look at things, or the spectacle, she engages her camera in an aesthetic of passing, of moving through coloured and textured space, in which ratios of speed pit the pace of the walker against the focal length and frame rate of the camera.

Therefore, much of what she achieves in the realm of "painting", in the medium of film, can be calculated against her technique and a studied use of the mid-shot. Whereas Viola often shoots wide, conjuring John Ford's 'big skies', albeit mostly at night or in the shimmering deserts of sand or snow, Hilyard eliminates any sense of spectacle in favour of a tighter formalist framing of surfaces, harnessed to the pace of walking.

You rarely get to walk with Viola's camera (when you do, it's with the disorientation of stumbling through a desert following one's shadow). Instead, his characters are mostly filmed from the static distance of the third person. We watch his personas march through fire, rise and submerge through bubbles of foaming water; or, we witness things tumble and fall through slow motion (*The Passing*) This third person disengagement pushes the viewer back to standing on the spot, a passive absorber of the spectacle. Hilyard, working in an era in advance of computer-gaming culture and gaming aesthetics, nevertheless makes full use of the subject-position of the gamer-user, employing the mid-shot framing familiar to anyone whose avatar has fought through the corridors of *Quake* or *Doom*.

Her penchant for corridors, living green passageways, echoed in the 'walls' through which she framed her installation, reinforces this user aesthetic of continuous motion, and what Virilio refers to as 'identification with the vector', a merging through motion of the user's body with what is on-screen. In cinema we take this kind of sensory engagement for granted, in particular in the genre revisited by Spielberg in the Indian Jones series: the 1950s vectorial cinema of roller coaster rides, and hairspin car chases, shot from the point of view of the driver/rider. Cinema of this kind creates a direct and immersive experience, riding the vector waves

Hilyard, of course, prefers a more discrete and abstract experience, one which takes modernism into the domain of a cine-eye capable of sustaining intensive and immanent relations with a moving surface. Credit of course must be given to the curatorial context which encourages a radical rethinking of what was at stake in such core experimental works, made at a time when moving image was scarcely a category. Pelt provides a platform for a timely reconsideration and appraisal of moving image and other electronic and time-based forms. A canny curatorial policy resists new media ghetto-isation and takes the concerns of time-based arts into the broader culture of painting and fine arts.

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Virginia Hilyard, *In the Depths* 20 Oct-30 Oct, 2005; Ivan Lisyak, *Dying Everyday* 26 Jan- 5 Feb, 2006

Pelt is located at ground floor, 46 Balfour Street, Chippendale, Sydney.

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