

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art Dallas Brooks Drive South Yarra Victoria Australia 3141  
Tel+613 9654 6422 Fax+613 9650 3438 [acca@connect.net.au](mailto:acca@connect.net.au) [www.artnow.org.au](http://www.artnow.org.au) Tues-Fri 11-5 Sat/Sun 12-5

**ARTS  
VICTORIA**



**MONASH  
UNIVERSITY**

Propulsion  
John Meade  
9 June to 15 July 2001  
Opening 8 June 6-8pm

 **CORPORATE INITIATIVES**  
*Audio Visual Specialists*





## John Meade *Propulsion*

I was finding it difficult to sleep on the island. Perhaps it was because the nights were more humid than at home, or maybe it was because my somnolent body was feeling displaced from its familiar futon-landscape. But, more than anything else, it seemed to be the noises that were keeping me awake. The swell of the ocean repeatedly slapped the rocky shoreline, the shrill squeaks of geckos pierced the darkness like the blips of a sonar scan, over-ripe pawpaws crashed to the ground and bounced off into the scrub setting off a scurry of startled or curious critters.

It's odd that the texture of this tropical sound scape was so abrasive to my ears. After all, I'd spent the previous twelve months holed up in an attic above Kings Cross, with the doof of dance music rattling the windows until dawn. But I guess I'd adjusted to that urban hubbub. In the same way that I didn't hear the pops and crackles of vinyl albums before I became accustomed to digital recordings, my ears had learnt to filter out the sound spikes of Sydney's night-life. The island, however, presented me with a completely new aural topography which had turned my body into a hyper-sensitive membrane.

The faculty of hearing, of course, isn't unique in this respect. Other senses adapt to different thresholds of perception and, in the process, transform our state of being. Our sense of balance adjusts to the pitching motion of a ship, turning us into creatures with "sea legs". Exposure to an arctic landscape leads to an ability to discern chromatic increments within the colour white. The figures in John Meade's videos are similarly being re-fashioned by the forces of their habitats. Buffeted by the effects of speed, their surfaces flutter in the turbulence while they drag their sensory bodysuits forward into new conditions of possibility.

I've often admired the way that Meade is able to evoke a similar sense of corporeal emergence and transfiguration in his work as a sculptor. In his most recent solo show at Sutton Gallery, for example, Meade designed a series of stylish coat hooks and door handles which were suggestive of butt plugs, dildos and genital restraints. Freed from the hold of the house, these shiny chrome fittings lend themselves to new couplings of bodies and environments. The figures in Meade's *Propulsion* videos are following similar trajectories, clinging to technologies which connect them up with the world in ways that are quite fantastic.

One of the things which distinguishes *Propulsion* from Meade's previous work, however, is the way that these processes have been embodied in human form. In his sculptural practice, Meade has always demonstrated a concern with "The Body" but he rarely focuses on the human figure itself. Instead, he tends to work with distended biomorphic forms which resemble embryonic growths, spermatozoa, or bulging eggs. Sculptures of this type suggest a certain corporeality but the human body is only present by inference; as something that has either dissolved into, or is emerging from, this swampy vitalism. This allows Meade to emphasise process over "person-ality".

It's fairly clear that *Propulsion* is still concerned with an impersonal vitality. Meade was careful, for instance, to choose actors who wouldn't bring too much "character" to their roles. And the biomorphic viscosity of Meade's earlier work is still evident in the motif of the tear drop, which softens the bodies and disperses them into the screen. But working in video, without the actual physicality of sculptural objects, Meade has employed the human form as a way of establishing a point of traction. And this treatment of the figure is quite important to an appreciation of how the video functions.

Meade isn't using video to tell a story or to paint a picture. Instead, *Propulsion* elaborates a space; a space of material modulation. Skimming through the blue-screen backdrops, the figures immerse themselves in the materiality of the image and then peel away into close-up shots that hover in the darkness of the gallery. There is a process of grounding and ungrounding being articulated by these human projectiles. Approaching and withdrawing from each other, folding and unfolding the depth of the screen to envelop the audience, the actors distribute a field of perpetual and immanent transformation. I like to think of them as superheroes of sensuality, surfing the substance from which they emerged and to which they will return.

Stephen Zagala

Stephen Zagala is a PhD student in the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University.

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John Meade is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

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### Select Solo Exhibitions

- 2001 *Propulsion*, AGNSW, Sydney
- 2000 *Objects to Live By*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
- 2000 *Mean Yellow*, Victorian Arts Centre forecourt, Melbourne International Festival
- 1999 *Hauler Me*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
- Swimming Pool Incident, First Floor, Melbourne
- 1997 *Nighttime*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
- 1996 *Tour de Force*, with Christopher Langton, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
- 1995 *Impostor*, The Basement Project, Melbourne

### Select Group Exhibitions

- 2001 *None More Blacker*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, curated by Lara Travis
- 2000 *Blockbuster 99*, UKS Gallery, Oslo, video compilation by Ricky Swallow
- 1999 *Universe #1*, Molecular Reality, EAF, Adelaide, curated by Christopher Chapman
- 1998 *Beauty 2000*, IMA, Brisbane, curated by David Broker
- 1998 *Deacons* Graham & James/Arts 21 Award, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne
- 1997 *Plastic Fantastic*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, curated by Ben Curnow
- Bad-Gay Art*, Mardi Gras Gallery, Sydney, curated by Robert Schubert

### Select Publications

- Robert Nelson, *Objects to Live By, The Age*, Melbourne, 29 November, 2000.
- Angus Trumble, *Thinking Big at the Experimental Art Foundation*, *Like #11*, Autumn, 2000
- Juliana Engberg, *Hauler Me*, *Art/Text #67*, November 1999
- Stephen O'Connell, *Hauler Me*, *Globe E-Journal*, August 1999
- Daniel Palmer, *Hauler Me*, *Eyeline #40*, 1999
- Robert Schubert, *Unmanned*, *Art/Text #59*, November 1997
- Peter Timms, *Nighttime*, *Melbourne Herald Sun*, 2 August, 1997
- Benjamin Genocchio, *Plastic Fantastic*, *Business Review Weekly*, 14 July, 1997
- Bruce James, *Bad Gay Art*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 February, 1997

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