Propulsion
John Meade
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Opening 8 June 6-8pm
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 squeaking of gulls 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 soundscape 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. And that I didn’t hear the rustle of pages of my books. After all, I’d heard the sound of my footsteps on the sand of Sydney’s night-life. The island, 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 movements within the colour white. The figures in John Meade’s paintings are similarly being re-fashioned by the forces of their habitats. Fulfilled by the effects of speed, their surfaces flatten in the turbulence while they drag their sensory bodies forward into new conditions of possibility.

I’ve often admired the way that Meade has been 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, whips and other restraints. Freed from the hold of the house, these shiny chrome fittings lend themselves to new couplings of bodies and environments. It seems as though in Meade’s work, Propulsion videos are following similar trajectories, clinging to technologies that 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 practices, Meade has always been more concerned with the ‘Body’ than he is with human figure itself. Instead, he tends to work with distended biomorphic forms which resemble embryonic growths. The strength of this type is that it’s not human but the human body is present by inference, as something that has either dissolved into, or is emerging from, this swamplike vitality. 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 the 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 bear crop, 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. Merging through the blue-screen backdrops, the figures immerse themselves in the materiality of the image and then peel away into close-ups that hover in the darkness of the gallery. There is a process of grounding and un-grounding being articulated by these human projections. 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 imminent transformation, I like to think of them as superheros of sensuality, surfacing 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.