

In what way did viewing the installation *If I Had You* affect my artistic thoughts and working practice?

On the 19 of January 2006, I went to see Darren Almond's installation *If I Had You* which was part of the 2006 Turner prize exhibition held at Tate Britain. The installation was about his personal relationship with his grandma and their joint memory of Almond's grandfather who had passed away some 20 years previously. Almond explains in his introduction to the installation that:

'If I Had You began when I was visiting my grandma a few years ago. She was in hospital she'd just had a mild stroke. And when I visited her she mistook me for my grandfather.' (Almond, 2005)

After this initial confusion, Almond explains how she leant into his ear and said that she missed Almond's grandfather 'and that she'd like to pass away and return to dancing with her husband. And her body's failing her but her mind wants to be away with him' (Almond, 2005). From this conversation Almond decided to take his grandma (once she had left hospital) back to Blackpool to the ballroom where she had once danced with her husband. Whilst there he videoed the dance hall and his grandmas gaze, both of which he uses in the final installation.

This was the first time I had come across a piece of work by Almond so I had little knowledge of what to expect. On entering the installation I found myself within a darkened room in which I was greeted with a large video projection of Almond's grandma and a soundtrack playing in the background which combined:

'a gentle piano melody with sliding footsteps, discernible in each corner of the gallery. Their circular movement echoes the turning sails and creaking mechanism of an illuminated windmill from Blackpool's promenade.'(tate.)

Surrounding the main projection of Almond's grandma are three others; one showing two dancer's feet as they move around the ballroom floor at Blackpool, another shows an

illuminated windmill that is slowly rotating, and on the floor there is a smaller screen which shows a candy-lit fountain of water (see fig1). The experience is similar to the enveloping manner of cinema and yet unlike the cinema, space is left for the viewer to contemplate. The repetitive flow of the soundtrack and video creates a calming mood similar to sitting by the sea with the waves lapping upon the shore.

With '*If I Had You*' Almond had found a way to engage with his audience in a sensitive and thoughtful way by presenting the fragile nature of the human soul through the use of only four video clips and a soundtrack on loop. The installation becomes the only space, the last space to go, it is the eternal, the dream with its ever repeating patterns, the dancing feet keep moving around and around, the fountain keeps flowing, the windmill keeps turning and his grandma continues to look on. It is a final resting place. Darren Almond states when he was interviewed:

'I hoped that despite an increment of melancholia produced in *If I had You* I also hoped that it would provide a certain optimism. I like a statement that was produced to me last night at my talk at the Tate, "the vision for the future is not utopia it is a re-interpreted 'telling' of the now. Memory is not exactly the site of freedom, but the layering of identity and memory is a basis for moving forward. The limit for this is language itself.'" (Kultureflash, 2003)

The installation touches on so many areas that are of interest to me, such as the use of personal material within art, the cinematic space and the use of symbolism and rhythm as a form of expression. The main one is the idea of expressing one's inner thoughts and feelings through language, whether it is visual language, or written language. Having lost my mother 2 months before going to the exhibition and my grandma 6 years previously, the issues of love, loss, memory, place, imagination and dreams were very prevalent in my thoughts. I decided to do some research into other works Almond had created, as I wanted to understand what his wider concerns were. What I found were projects which spanned widely varying subject matters ranging from epic historical issues, such as World War Two and Auschwitz, *Oswiecim, March 1997*, to romantic ideals of exploration

related to the Arctic and the Antarctic, such as *11miles from safety*. Others such as *Traction* and *If I Had You* dealt with more personal relationships.

With the various bodies of work Almond had created, there were subtle relationships that focused around the subject of ‘how time and space intersect with history’ (Kate Bush). Many of Almond’s installations are written about in relation to the writings of George Orwell (1903-1950), whose major theme was time, particularly the industrialisation of time. Orwell was concerned about the effects industry was having upon politics and people’s daily lives. I found this very appropriate in relation to Almond’s wider body of work, which engages with ‘the background textures of human existence’ (engholmengelhorn) rather than being limited to a conceptually narrow theme, but less helpful in relation to *If I Had You*, in which that ‘background texture’ that Almond explores is the inner thoughts/memories of his grandma rather than any epic historical or overtly political theme. Almond does not give any social, economic or industrial context other than the fact that they are at Blackpool, the holiday resort for the working class, yet even this is an unclear point of reference as the windmill he creates is a representation of what is in his grandma’s head rather than any that existed or exists in Blackpool.

Almond states that ‘this piece is about a portrait of a widow caught between the present and the past in some sort of field of memory’ (Almond, 2005). Therefore I turned to the writings of Virginia Woolf, who was equally ‘fascinated with time—both as a sequence of moments and in terms of years and centuries’ (encarter,2006), but who dealt with it from the perspective of the individual. In her novels Woolf: explored her characters inner psychology through the use of symbolism and metaphor with the intention of creating a literary form that would convey inner life. To this end, she used a technique known as stream of consciousness, recording, as she described it:

‘Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon consciousness’ (Woolf, 88:2003)

With *If I Had You*, Almond uses the same technique to explore the inner workings of his grandma's mind, but instead of using words he uses four video clips. Each one has its own symbolic meaning 'the sparkling water as the elixir of life, the old lady as a sign of the harvest of life. Also the seemingly endless turning wings of the windmill refer to the subject 'time'' (TBA21, 2003).

I knew about Woolf's work before I saw *If I Had You*, and her writings had had a very direct effect upon my working practice. Woolf's main process for getting at these 'atoms' was through her diaries, here she documented everything from the everyday details of her life to the historical events which she lived through, but her main interest within these diaries was recording her internal thoughts. Inspired by the emphasis she placed upon her internal thoughts, I began to amalgamate my sketch books and note books/diaries together in the hope of breaking down any artificial barriers, which existed between my private and public work. I used these note books to express my creativity and to register my feelings and emotions through the traumatic final year of my mother's life. Within these pages there were no barriers, I wrote down where I was, what was happening, dreams, theories, desires, and ideas which covered a broad spectrum of interests including Architecture, Children's Illustration, Photography, Documentary video, Music video, Abstract Sculpture and many more. All of which, similarly to Almond's wider body of work, has a subtle and intricate relationship with each other.

Whilst doing this, I was also working on my dissertation, which centred on the work of Wassily Kandinsky, an abstract painter, who was interested in finding a universal visual language in which he could express his inner feelings. I became more and more interested in the vast array of interests which Kandinsky had and the way in which they informed his work. From my research since then I have come across Mallarme, a poet, who like Kandinsky was 'interested in esoteric theories which explored mysterious, hidden connections between phenomena.' (Reynolds, 1995:31)

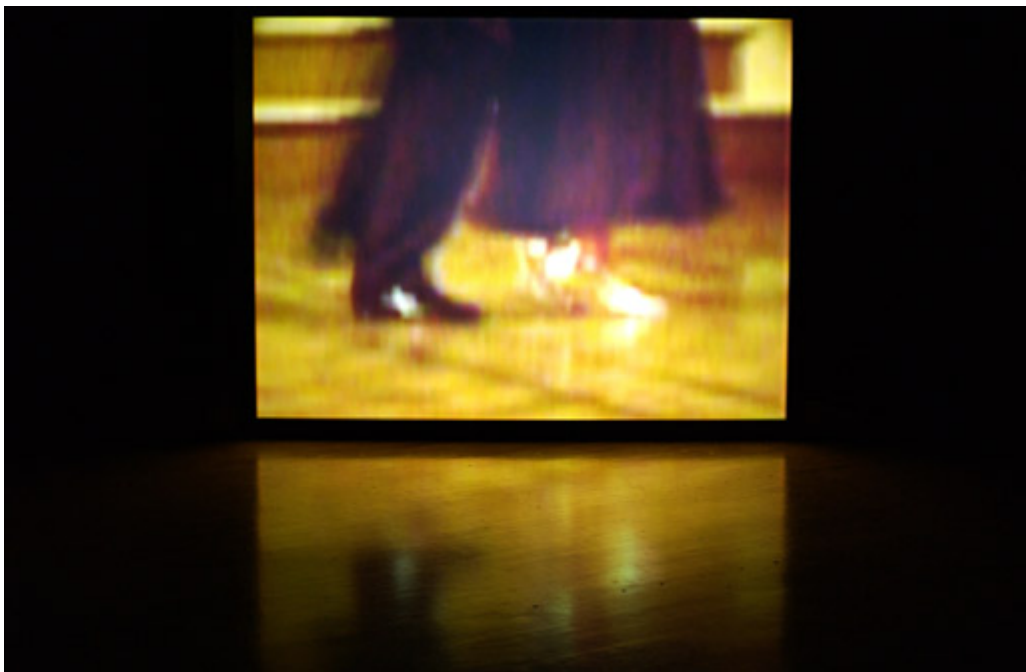
‘Mallarme sees the task of poetry as freeing both objects and words from contingent, individual existence by transposing them into a network of reciprocal relationships.’ (Reynolds, 1995:30)

Which brings me back to Woolf who felt that ‘the crucial problem in the biographies that her generation’ (Lee, 1997:10) had inherited was ‘the tug between fact and fiction and the difficulty of getting to the soul’ (Lee, 1997:10). Therefore in her diary, like her essays and her stories and novels, she ‘blurs the lines between history, biography and fiction’ (Lee, 1997:8). Like Kandinsky and Mallarme, Woolf sees an inherent problem in setting rigid barriers between these different disciplines.

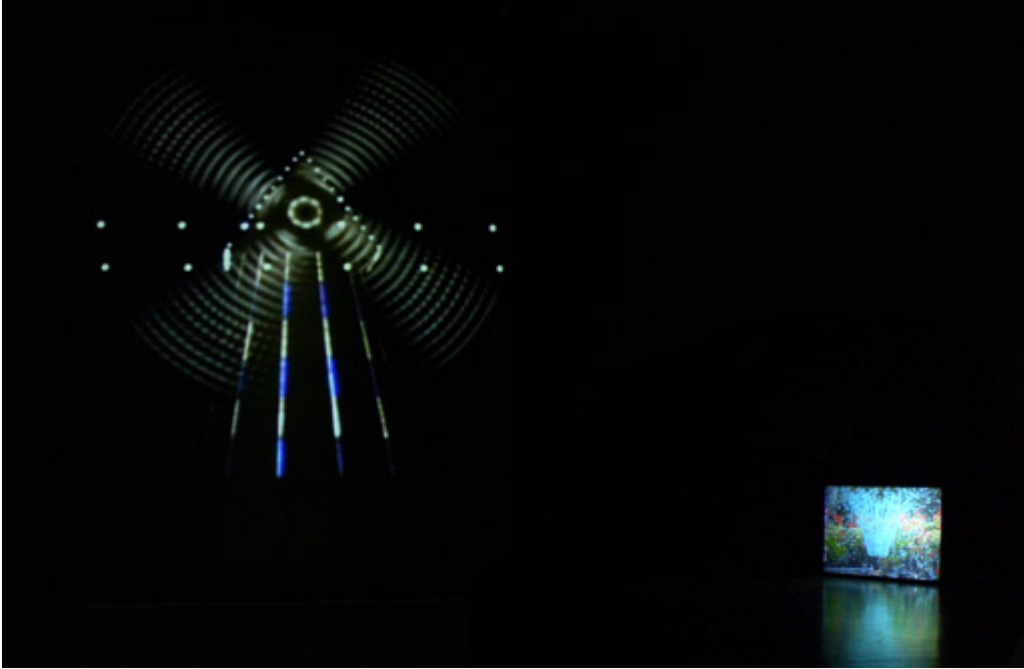
These explorations took me to a point within my own work where I became less concerned in following any one individual line of thought. Instead I became more interested in the idea of mapping chains of thought that exist between the diverse subjects which interested me and understanding what relevance they had to what was happening within personal life and to wider cultural issues. With a heightened sense of the fragility of life, I felt that it was of importance to leave a trace of my consciousness. A document in which the viewer may be able to see the ‘atoms’ of my inner life as they left my brain and see them as part of a larger pattern of discreet relationships. I wanted to create a space that explored the events of the year of my mother’s death, as well as showing a progression of thoughts and feelings, but also a timeless space where the line between memory, imagination, and dreams could be blurred in a similar manner to *If I Had You*. So inspired by the exploration of intimate feelings I found within *If I Had You* and the writings of Virginia Woolf I decided to use the pages of my note books, which were initially only made for myself as the subject of my work; they were placed together with photos and found artefacts and edited into a book.



(figure1)



(figure2)



(figure 3)



(figure 4)

Bibliography

Almond, Darren. (2005)

http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2005/transcript_darrenalmond.htm

(26 April 2006)

Engholmengelhorn. (2000)

http://www.engholmengelhorn.com/SHOWS/almond_hosking_08_06_2000/DAIT.html

(08 may 2006)

Hamza, Walker (1999)

<http://www.renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.40.0.0.0.0.html> (28 April 2006)

Jopling, Jay. (2003). *11miles...from Safety*. London: White Cube

Kultureflash. (2003)

<http://www.kultureflash.net/archive/145/priview.html> (28 April 2006)

Lee, Hermione. (1997). *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage

Mark Kaplan. (2005)

<http://charlotte-street.blogspot.com/2005/06/la-voix-sacree.html> (28 April 2006)

Neri, Louise.(2003). *Antipodes Inside the White Cube*. London: White Cube

Reynolds, Dee. (1995). *Symbolist Aesthetics and early abstract art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

TBA21. (2003)

http://www.tba21.org/collection/artists/almond_darren/pdf/AlmondD_IfIhadYou_en.pdf

(31 April 2006)

Trussardi, Fondazione Nicola (2003)

<http://www.artfacts.net/index.php/pageType/exhibitionInfo/exhibition/17204> (12 may

2006)

Woolf, Virginia. (2003). *The Common Reader: Volume 1*. London: Vintage