

The persistence of the present

Can we ever be present in the past? Perhaps in moments: a scene glimpsed, a sound heard, a history felt, a story grasped. Yet we are always, invariably, brought back to the present, like an incessant nag at our shirt. Our brief forays into other time periods are marshaled and interrupted by the present material and mental states we find ourselves in, just as, on occasion, these circumstances are reconfigured by our confrontations with the past.

Hermes

The title of this exhibition imagines a short diversion from a story. Hermes, the figure who carried messages and stories between the world of the gods and the world of the mortals, traveled the border between material and imagination. The protector of thieves, travelers, herdsmen, orators, wit, literature and poets, he is the Ancient Greek embodiment of 'Trickster'¹ – a figure who appears in different incarnations across continents, time periods and cultures. But in the imagined diversion, Hermes is, for once, tongue-tied. Unable to describe something of the world from which he had come, his role is momentarily suspended.

The creative idiot, the wise fool, the grey-haired baby, the cross-dresser, the speaker of sacred profanities²

Trickster is the figure who lurks within the fertile fields of ambiguity, duplicity and contradiction; who, with an adeptness for the paradoxes of language, will suggest the *other* solution to a problem or impasse, a solution we may have missed because it was forbidden, unknown, or, in transgression of certain codes. The writer Lewis Hyde recalls that "the name Hermes once meant 'he of the stone heap' which tells us that the cairn is more than a trail marker – it is an altar to the forces that govern these spaces of heightened uncertainty, and to the intelligence needed to negotiate them."

Uncleanly sounds

Residual materiality is always there, even in and around the most seemingly immaterial processes of communication. The teeth, the lips, the tongue, the larynx, the lungs: these make up only some of the features of the apparatus of speech. While often distracting, interfering and unwanted, the 'wet and dirty'³ sounds, as the writer Steven Connor calls them – the hisses and clicks and slurps, the muddy background of the sentences we make – are also the essential material intermediaries on which communication hinges.

Talking knots

Knots in cotton twine can be made with an S orientation or a Z orientation; twists preserve or release energy in the coils of the twine; ends are tightened or unraveled. Such elaborate arrangements are how 'quipus', also known as 'talking knots', are made; the ancient message system of the pre-colonial Incas. Like the folds of the larynx that enable speech, the folds of quipus are locutionary acts, utterances with intention: there are battles to be recorded, calendars to be tracked, family histories to be folded in. The often brightly coloured strings splay outwards from a baseline, like a necklace. Many of their codes still to be cracked, these small, knotted balls on strings are emissaries of knowledge from a different time. They await revelation, guarded behind glass.

Mortichnia

Flung into the depths of a lagoon, an unfortunate horse-shoe crab, about 150 million years ago, struggled to its feet and crawled a distance of 9.7 metres before succumbing to the oxygenless conditions of the water. Uncovered by scientists in the lithographic limestones of Bavaria in 2002, the fossilized record of the creature's 'death march' survived to tell its story. Its final steps and its body turned to stone become the physical contours around which the knowledge of its existence hinges. Memory, molded into particles of matter, is deciphered like coded symbols of an ancient hieroglyph or knotted twists in a string, read like the suspected weapon in a murder trial.

Diversions

Within Hermes' diversion, the works of this exhibition form a study of memory's inscription into matter, and of matter's command over memory. Together they provide an exploration of diversions from the main picture, and of the ways in which the 'stuff' of the material world intervenes in memory and imagination at the same time that it binds them together.

¹ Jean Fisher points out that Trickster has many different incarnations around the world, including Raven, Hare and Coyote in North America; Monkey King in China; Eshu in the Yoruba of Nigeria; Signifying Monkey in African America. (Jean Fisher, *Towards a Metaphysics of Shit* (Documenta 11, Platform 5 the Catalogue) 2002. Hatje Cantz.).

² Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (1998), 7.

³ Steven Connor, 'Michel Serres' Milieux' 2002, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/milieux/> (accessed 7/2013).

Combining a scrutiny of naturally unfolding events with other constructed scenes, **Rosalind Nashashibi**'s films focus on the moments at which mythical and imaginary possibilities filter into the everyday reality that we are so used to inhabiting. Shot at a gay cruising spot on London's Hampstead Heath, *Jack Straw's Castle* chronicles the shift from day to night with a meandering but probing eye. Summoning impressions and imagery from a lush thicket of erotic sylvan stories – from Greek myths to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – *Jack Straw's Castle* follows an unexpected road through a forest of perceptions, turning in finally, upon itself, to reveal the film's own construction.

Set against a chapter of coerced forgetting, **William Hsu**'s newly commissioned work attempts to forge a memory of what he did not know. Between the years of 1949 and 1987, Taiwan – Hsu's country of birth – endured the second longest period of martial law in history, an era known as the 'White Terror'. Registering the impossibility of sharing the kinds of experiences which pervade his subjects of study, Hsu's work draws a partial contour of the nation's past through one of its exiled subjects. Certain objects are foregrounded: a hand, a book, a disguise. Like clues, each one divulges an impression, a detail, an absence of the greater story from where they have come. Together these provide a prismatic lens which enables the sensing of a history that cannot be recounted directly.

In **Milli Jannides**' paintings, vision and memory are knotted together. Each work begins with a quote or a passage lifted from literature, often delineating a relationship between the physical landscape of a scene and the emotional landscape of a character. Through her material sensibility these narrative suggestions are revealed and concealed. A tree, chains, an hourglass, and steps: these archetypal images both magnify our attention and work as decoys, the real picture disclosing itself slowly – sometimes only afterwards. The final paintings, having journeyed away from the original quotation, invite, confound and elude viewers looking for an explanation.

In its tightly controlled passage through the throat and mouth, human breath is shaped, patterned and steered towards meaning in the form of sound and voice. Guttural slurps, chesty reverbs, and the spectrum of visceral details contained within the timbre of a voice are always there before or in the words they are forming. **Manon de Boer**'s most recent film, *one, two, many* grasps at these ineffable moments as they escape our linguistic processes of recall, translation and description. Split into three

parts, the film records the tense, bodily deftness of a flautist; a spoken description of the sound of Roland Barthes' voice as he presents a lecture, and a group of people walking around a train station, listening to four people perform 'Tre canti popolari' by Giacinto Scelsi, a musical work known for its invented pronunciation and syllabication.

Eleanor Cooper's work evolves from a search for diamond shaped rocks near her home in Auckland's Maungawhau, Mount Eden. A hand-crafted wooden box with a pinhole is used to record an image on light sensitive paper. A delicate process: only fractions of millimetres separate a hole that is too large from one too small. What occurs is a circumscribed and partial recording; a sleight of hand which assembles – like human memory – a fragmentary, incomplete picture and a distorted reflection of reality.