



Front: *The Shape of Between*, 2006, digital video, 12 min 59 sec infinite loop.

Back top: *Opera House Steps March*, 2006, digital video, 2 min 57 sec infinite loop.

Back centre: *Opera House Steps: Configuration One (A) and One (B)*, 2005, acrylic on digital print on colourlife photo paper, 21 x 30 cm each.

Top: *Opera House Steps December*, 2006, digital video, 2 min 28 sec infinite loop.

Above left: *Ganga Morning (yellow)*, 2006, oil, watercolour and graphite on canvas 51 x 41 cm.

Above centre: *Ganga Morning (green)*, 2006, oil, watercolour and graphite on canvas 51 x 41 cm.

Above right: *Ganga Morning (purple)*, 2006, watercolour, oil and graphite on canvas 51 x 66 cm.



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Jess MacNeil



Above: *Varanasi One*, 2006, oil, watercolour and graphite on canvas 198 x 152 cm.

Above right & far right: *The Shape of Between*, 2006, digital video, 12 min 59 sec infinite loop.



Jess MacNeil: The Shape of Between

There is a painting at London's National Gallery depicting the execution of the Emperor of Mexico by firing squad. Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867) is a strange painting, which has been cut into pieces and reconstructed onto a stretcher emulating the original scale of the work, now showing only partial elements of the scene. As a result, the soldiers' cocked rifles are aimed at an area of raw blank canvas, and all that remains visible of Maximilian is a hand, held or restrained by one of the soldiers. The reasons for its destruction are a mystery. Be they political or aesthetic censorship, or physical disintegration, the result is an intriguing tableaux which both communicates and obscures a moment in time. This deconstructed work offers an accidental critique on the effects of history, politics and memory and as such, has always seemed a contemporary vista despite its historical content. As viewers instinctively and repeatedly piece together their own version of the obstructed scene, there is the space to contemplate the reasons for its violent journey to now.

Jess MacNeil's practice treats the pictorial plane in a similar way, allowing absence to play an active role in the interpretation of her subject matter and medium. Her paintings are executed from personal photographs, rearticulated in a manner which lays bare the process of painting. Pencil plans are exposed, and areas are left untended, fragmenting the completed moment as captured by a photograph. Figurative elements

orchestrate these works; we are drawn towards the girl lost in thought, the arc of a telegraph cable or the ramshackle shape of foreign villages. However these interludes are never concrete: details continuously and abruptly fall away. In their place, abstract colour fields or raw canvas compete with the representation, as the ground emerges, destabilising the pictorial subject. As a result, MacNeil's structures become fluid and shifting, disallowing our inclination to consume a scene as a whole, and mirroring the fragmented process of remembrance and understanding. Questioning the authority of the photographic image as a unit of truth and permanence, these paintings show a set of personal signifiers which seem to have undergone the same ravages faced by all technology: subjectivity, deterioration, obsolescence and slippage. MacNeil explicitly aligns the medium of paint with the discourse of photography and film, articulating both her canvases and videos as time-based practices, equally susceptible to flux and permutation.

Having conducted a sustained investigation into the juncture between painting and photography, MacNeil's recent video works are an engaging progression from the tensions she explores on canvas. The *Opera House Steps* works began with a set of photo-paintings of people against the backdrop of this iconic building's steps. Isolated by white paint on the photographic surface, these figures are traced and extended in a linear way, or the negative space left unpainted in their wake. As if mapping an imagined path, the unpainted area marks multiple individual journeys, creating an aesthetic akin to the matrices of the video editing suite. Humans

become non-sequential particles, points for mapping the fluctuations of public space. In the *Opera House Steps* video works, the human element has become implicit, as MacNeil painstakingly removes the physical forms traversing the steps. All that remains are ghost-like shadows thrown by an anonymous cast of passers by.

What is striking about this work is the resemblance of the shadows to brushstrokes. They trace the hard edges of the urban step structure, which fills the frame, continuing MacNeil's painterly trajectory of deconstructing visual codes, and what we see is an engaging observation of the fluidity of human movement and the formalising of human behaviour. The two versions of this work were taken at opposing seasons, and differences in light quality, shadow length and the pace of summer and autumn walkers create contrasting environments in these works. On some level this work makes visible ideas surrounding chaos and complexity theories, as the unpredictable nature of individual destinies are tracked. It also aligns contemporary digital models with the chrono-photographic motion studies of the late nineteenth century, as the horizontal planes break the residue of movement into discontinuous, apparently random sections.

The Shape of Between continues MacNeil's enigmatic extension of the painting tradition and the convergences of civilisation with the possibilities of the digital arena. One hundred seconds of footage extended to almost thirteen minutes, the work shows four rowing boats on the Ganges River captured on a recent stay in Varanasi in India,

highlighting the nuances of the passing of time. Presented without the rigidity of the single-point perspective in the *Opera House Steps* series, there is no horizon or shoreline with which to orient oneself, connecting to the Eastern artistic tradition of multiple-point perspective. The still focal point rests on one boat at a time, surveying its path through the serene uninterrupted surface of the Ganges, a river rich with religious and cultural significance in India. This simple intervention quietly alters both the choreography and atmosphere of the looped scene each time the 'focal anchor' readjusts to the next boat. The boats therefore transcend any initial associations we may have attributed them and become slow animated 'pixels', responding to the shifts in framing by appearing to skim the water's surface at differing rates. Accompanying this looped study is a sparse electronic sound composition by Marcus Kaiser which continues the idea of deferred time through cyclical rattles and chimes. As the boat's oars rotate in the still treacle of the editing suite, we are led on a meditative and mediated study of temporal motion.

Like the many imagined faces of Maximilian, these works operate by momentarily suspending our conventional perception. By questioning these small but inherited 'truths'—the snapshot, the completed canvas, the act of walking a metropolis or traversing a river—MacNeil draws our awareness to the permeability of time and the forgotten corners of our assumed reality, refocusing us quite literally on the 'shape of between'.

Clare Lewis
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