

## **& fell even more deeply in love with you!**

Cut to a space, a gallery, here after a visit to David Austen; a small room on a cold afternoon. Thoughts are filled with images from a studio and ideas about a film as yet unseen. How to make sense of the range of things both imagined and discussed. Then there is a small untitled and undated drawing that attracts the attention. By the experimental structuralist film-maker Paul Sharits, it is ostensibly a page torn from a notebook; the sheet is covered with writing and other overwritten annotations. It begins top left, mid-sentence, a palimpsest, a fragment of something by e.e. cummings:

*film! what passion! delivery!) & fell even more deeply in love with you!*

And towards its bottom edge beneath a series of scribbled lines,

*TOUCH "ME" I Quivvvvv "er"!*

Guidance, a convenient signpost or mere coincidence, it indicates a way forward like a clearing in a forest. And most apposite it is too; for the occurrence seems a process akin to much I have seen.

Austen is best known for bodies of work across a range of media, from painting to watercolour, from drawing to objects to text to film, each shaped and brought together by the major theme of his practice – the relationships between us and the things we apprehend in the world. His is a curiosity with all that it means to be cogently alive, especially the contemplation of love and loss, the all too human tragic-comedy of our emotions that compel us onward.

A very direct route into his work can be seen through the opportunities afforded by particular materials, often quite humble. The modesty of such pieces is arrived at through a deliberate process, one which fixes the fragility of the form at a specific point - be it made in watercolour, a collage of text or a fleeting scene on celluloid. The picture is only arrived at when gravity appears to take hold; the frailty of the material and sensibility expressed working hand in hand with the image created, a thing of tough poignancy. Sometimes it's difficult to face things we'd rather keep under cover.

The artist's studio provides us with insight as to both his working methods and the diversity of sources that are absorbed and filtered until sometime

somewhere it catches and coalesces into being. Suspended from the ceiling are a range of objects, plaster-cast star forms or mobiles of painted concentric rings of cardboard and wire. It is as if we are entering a stage primed to receive our actions. Indeed it is one that forms the backdrop for a letter from a lover spurned in Austen's new film. Then pinned to an adjacent wall there is a page photocopied from a book, the painting *Sleeping Figure* (1974) by Francis Bacon. Above the smears of paint that signify the person there is a strange ellipse, a swirl of semi-circular marks which suggest a structure to partially shield the harshness of naked light.

Piles of books – some found, some gifts, some hand-made from the remnants of other works – attest to a particular essence and the often literary underpinning of his work as a whole. Tables are strewn with material that will eventually resonate in some wonderful way. A back issue of *Sight & Sound* jostles for attention with postcards of religious statues and medieval devils – a bleeding Christ, sacred and profane – in turn propped in front of a framed photograph of Sex Pistols lead singer Johnny Rotten in his heyday. T.S. Eliot poems next to noir novellas next to a comic book called *Black Hole*, its cover depicting a red bikini clad woman as a snake entwines its way around her from knee deep water. It is these juxtapositions that cause new meanings to occur. Chance and accident result in fresh connections emerging, creating images that are felt initially rather than apprehended explicitly and forcibly entering our world. Here is a world of ambiguity, of suggestions, where the texts we read and the images we see place us on uneven ground. They are at once a simultaneous embodiment of saint and sinner. A chance remark overheard, caught on the wind that reverberates and settles into form.

And so we arrive at this new exhibition. Visitors first encounter The Yard space at Modern Art Oxford. Half interior half outdoors, it occupies a liminal space made all more apparent by Austen's installation which seems to stop just short of theatre. Large-scale billboards, black text on white, line the walls and alternate with details of images. They proclaim in capital letters the characters and spaces they occupy to conjure an ulterior world of dark shadows, of figures crippled by their motives, their experiences and their surroundings. This staged alleyway is lit by a series of steel ringed naked bulbs, their shadows gloomily lighting the parade of cinema-like posters; BETSY BONES, THE MOON AND JOE CHRISTMAS, SMOKE TOWN. Where will this street lead us? On into the inside where there is no easy relief.

The texts are created by a collage of individual letters and phrases often oscillating between love and fear, their hand-made quality creating a state of flux where they seem like one thing but are perhaps not. Isolated

elements are taken from a myriad of sources – newspaper headlines, graffiti on a subway wall, phrases from everyday speech, scraps from a novel or philosophical text – all brought together to form a new landscape. They become timeless or in a sense at least of time. The yard installation generates a palpable atmosphere which extends its humid intensity with the film projection.

*End of Love*, Austen's 2009 film is shot on Super 16mm and is his most ambitious to date running at 65 minutes. It reads as vaudeville set in some indeterminate time and place, played out with no audience, a fragmentary narrative. Composed of twelve parts, each comprising a discrete piece, for the most part monologues by particular characters – the Dark Angel, the Lonely Astronaut, Nobody, the Prisoner of Love etc. Intertwined episodes of the work collectively read like a sequence of related short stories or prose – dislocated chapters from the same book. Scenes are heralded by a series of title screens, white on black, that introduce themes and set the tone, for example POISON TOWN, LOVE NEVER FOUND ME, and GOING DOWN TO HELL AND UP TO HEAVEN. The overarching darkness which emerges hints at a complex and potentially sinister uncertainty; one that is nevertheless tempered by a recognition or acknowledgement of some form of redemption to come. Or at least its possibility. It holds back from melodrama, never quite reaching too bleak a sadness.

Filmed in the Rose Theatre, Kingston, the film opens with a quotation from *A living person speaks for the dead*, from the *Last Love Poems of Paul Eluard* published in 1946: 'My ruined heart flies with the dust', before an image is revealed, a prologue of sorts. Looking straight up at a thing unfamiliar in flickering light, it dawns on us this kaleidoscope is a view of the ceiling structure, an architectural abstract rotating form. Like some kind of alien spaceship it carousels its descent, this quality enhanced by the ominous sound. The first sequence is entitled DOUBT and begins with a woman in a long white dress, the camera slowly moving out from an extreme close-up of her eyes to reveal the full figure. She operates as a scene setter of sorts, her story mocking us in our beliefs, our attempts at intimacy; the things we hold close, most dear. There is often a rawness and quiet intensity to the words, sometimes direct and shocking. The second section features a male character. He is a lovelorn dandy (wearing blue velvet – a textual nod to film-maker David Lynch perhaps with the heightened realism of the film of this title) who wears his heart on his sleeve. He cuts an almost pathetic figure in his Dickensian faded splendour, having given himself over to the possibility of love, a hopeless romantic.

There then follows a cast of differing characters, men and women, lonely, damaged and expectant by turns, plus other figures that have featured in Austen's ongoing vocabulary from previous films, such as *Smoking Moon* (2007). Amongst others, from the Lonely Astronaut waiting eternally, to the well dressed business man who has been everywhere, done everything but never found love, to the Bonnie and Clyde/ Sailor and Lula couple on the run. Each offers their take on relationships ranging from despair to obsession, maudlin to hopeful, self doubt to loathing. Tender, poignant, angry, obnoxious – these are the longings of loves past and future.

The penultimate sequence is announced by the title screen of JACK. We see in close-up a ring covered hand as the camera (lovingly) caresses his heavily tattooed body. It moves steadily around arms, legs, back and a clanking heavily chained neck. Images and words jump out from these jailhouse inscriptions – The Capture/ The Rapture/ The Rupture of a Soul (a quotation from the English playwright Sarah Kane known for her quiet poetic intensity in dealing with themes of redemptive love and sexual desire) – and simply drawn line figures, the latter familiar from Austen's watercolours. Their fragility here is more pronounced through the scratched into flesh ink-blue lines. Or else they recall protagonists pictured earlier in the film – the betrayed black Cyclops, the ancient crescent moon. One is reminded of Bradbury's collection of stories *The Illustrated Man*, a vagrant whose tattooed body hosts characters of different future existences. They come to life to tell tales within a recurring theme of the psychology between people in much the same way as the episodes we have been watching unite in ruminations on the demise of love.

As the camera tracks around this chillingly emaciated person, other clues are tellingly revealed – Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, George Bernard Shaw's play of Saint Joan – to reinforce the film's overarching thematic. And the aged figure's sad, reflective narration leads us to understand he is Jack the Giant Killer, he of myth who now waits for some end or is waiting for someone who will bring an end. The shortest piece is kept for last – a coda of paper flowers, artificiality defied as their tender, ephemeral nature fades from colour to black and white, then into the brightest of light.

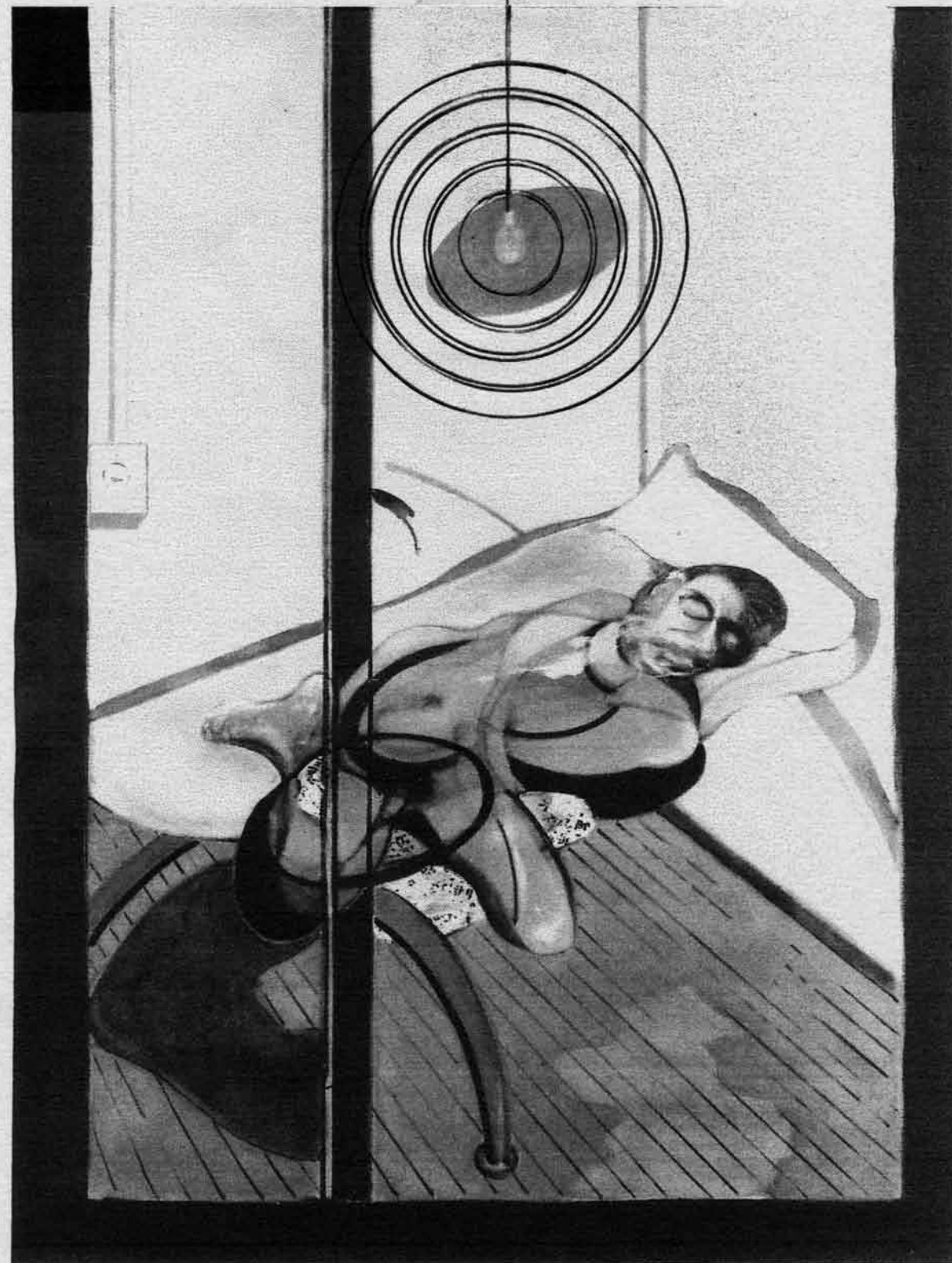
The spillage and slippage between things is typically where Austen locates his ideas, the spring from which his vision wells. The associations that are invoked, or summoned up even can seem like a form of incantation, blinded by passion, distraught by loss. To offer oneself unequivocally to another, to subsume the self wholeheartedly, is an abandonment that holds potential for pitfalls and an almost sublime fulfilment. Yet if adrift where might we find solace? *End of Love* offers us no easy answer. The impulses that

drive us may at best be forever bittersweet, the ache an ever-continuing yearning for resolution. To lay one open, to accept the raw possibility of vulnerability, this is a place of pleasure with pain; a finding of love in Hell. Ups and downs; there's nothing in between.

I remember reading about discussions between Ian McCulloch and other members of the band Echo and the Bunnymen regarding the lyric to their 1982 song *The Back of Love*. Band members felt uneasy about writing a love song. They weren't after all a pop group. Not at all Mac protested, it was about taking advantage; it's the back of love.

**Nigel Prince**

Director, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver



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Modern Art Oxford  
30 Pembroke Street  
Oxford OX1 1BP, UK  
Tel. +44 (0) 1865 722733  
www.modernartoxford.org.uk

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