Andrew Carnie: Dark Garden
Pilgrimage; All true pilgrimages should end with a confrontation
Gary Kennard

In the dim light I could see semi-transparent white drapes hanging across the room, ghosting gently with each faint disturbance of the air. They were in layers and had openings along their lengths through which we slid to the far side. Slide projectors sat on stands at four opposite points on either side of the drapes. Faint lights were breaking in from small gaps in the creaky structure of the room, but all was dull and dark. The projectors are switched on and begin throwing their cycle of images onto the voile screens.

I am struck first by the three-dimensional quality of the work, as images slowly emerge and seep into and through the thin fabric screens. They process on a large scale, filling the room with sequences which sometimes combine into a single scene and then fragment across the width of my vision. But also, as the projectors take their turn, they sink into the layers of fabric, like visual echoes growing fainter or louder. I see numbers float in random sequences and sizes, then, growing larger, organise themselves into ordered lines. Seen through the triple layer of screens they, at the same time, recede into faint figures, now becoming ever more formal, now in lines and rows. This sorting goes on with other groups of objects. Pictures of fruit, at first in chaos, are regimented and ordered. The hypnotic rhythm of the sequences induces a quiet state of mind. The chunk-shunk of the projectors changing slides is the only sound.

Now on the screen a large room with closed windows comes into vision. A naked young man in a series of linked poses appears, moves across our sight line and disappears. Windows open, revealing a web of branches of a tree outside. The shadows of these flood onto the room floor and gradually take over, as if the roots and branches had become the room itself; a terrifyingly dual image of tree forms and the brain's neurons and synaptic patterns. Flowering coral-like objects appear and grow, revealing as they enlarge minute details of delicate structures. At times the outline of a skull encases all the intricate workings of the leaves, fruit and numbers. The movement of the piece is one of chaos into order, natural forms nailed down into sequence, then releasing again into freefall. And always the disturbed and disturbing image of the naked young man wandering, seemingly lost, across our vision.

This then is the object of my pilgrimage, not the room itself, but this further journey into a darker and mysterious level of perception and consciousness. But what are these images signifying? What is their reference point? Autism. This piece, which Carnie has called 'Dark Garden: Wired in a Different Way' springs from thoughts on autism. Andrew Carnie has for many years been making work springing from his passionate interest in science and how knowledge of recent scientific research effects our reactions to life and art; how it changes our images of the world around us, and our image of ourselves. 'Dark Garden' is a continuation of methods and ideas expressed in earlier installations dealing with these ideas.

This new exploration into autism seems more disturbing than earlier projects, such as 'The Magic Garden' and 'We Are Where We Are'. This is hardly surprising because autism is a

truly disturbing condition. The media has in the main concentrated on the more positive ends of the autistic spectrum, such as high achieving Asperger's Syndrome or the extraordinary achievements of autistic savants. These last include those with abilities, which seem miraculous to those of a neurotypical brain set, displaying phenomenal mathematical and computational talents or stunning feats of memory. It is also true that most websites dealing with autism, even the most respected, of necessity play down the negative aspects of the condition, pointing out where help may be found and how the problems inherent in it may be approached and handled. But for the rest profound autism is a devastating condition both for those with the condition and those living within their circle. One only has to look a list of some basic characteristics of autism, here from the National Autistic Society in the mildest of descriptions, to imagine how this may play out in daily life: 'difficulty with social interaction . . . difficulty with social imagination . . . learning disabilities . . . sensory sensitivity . . . love of routines'. Even with those at the higher end of the spectrum, those with Asperger's Syndrome for example, have real social difficulties and whose condition profoundly affects their relationships and day-to-day life.

Is it possible then for those of a neurotypical mind set to imagine what it is like to be 'wired' in the autistic spectrum? Given that it is a 'spectrum' it must be so that neurotypicals share, even if in minute areas of their perception, some characteristics of autism. But it would seem that, even with a fully functioning 'theory of mind' (the ability to imagine what someone else is thinking or feeling, an ability distinctly lacking in many with autism) this would be an almost impossible task.

Carnie's 'Dark Garden', while not attempting actually to get inside the autistic brain, presents us with a powerfully poetic amalgam of autistic traits, imagined as they may be both from the outside and from the inside. He shows us how it might be to go over and over an obsessive ordering of life, the repetition, the desperate need for pattern in a random world. But also we see the naked human from the outside, going round and round in an unending dance, seeking security in repetitive movements in a universe, which will never conform to these demands. The work hints at the autistic inability to understand the visual clues of neurotypical communication; the eternal frustration, the myth of Sisyphus become real, all day and every day.

In this sequence of images, we can see ourselves mirrored. 'Dark Garden' may have started as contemplation on autism but ends with a universal reflection on our own craving for understanding, meaning and order in an indifferent and chaotic universe. This work displays a profound way of facing up to what life actually is, rather than fantasising about it, and it is this that makes some works of art meaningful. 'Dark Garden' is at once beautiful and disturbing, compelling and terrifying. This is part of the stuff of life and echoes the endlessly mysterious and ambiguous situation we all find ourselves in. Carnie said, when the viewing was over and we were emerging from his studio into the dazzling sunlight, that this work should be seen in a meditative room. This is exactly right. In a broader context Carnie's work is part of that universal movement in contemporary art wherein artists express, in one way or another, the need to make the 'sacred space', as in installations, the place wherein transition from one psychological state to another is enabled by the means of art. These are the new temples, the new chapels of meditation for new generations no longer satisfied by

out of date mythologies and desperate for works that deal with their current existential situation. Carnie's work fulfils this demand.

It is right that we should make pilgrimages to places where hard truths such as those expressed by 'Dark Garden' may be confronted. Hard truths do not and should not come easy. I entered this dark garden and came out having had a new insight not only into the mysteries and implications of autism but also into my own relationship with the world and my shaky perceptions of it – an indication that this work of art is doing its job and that it is doing it on a profound level.

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