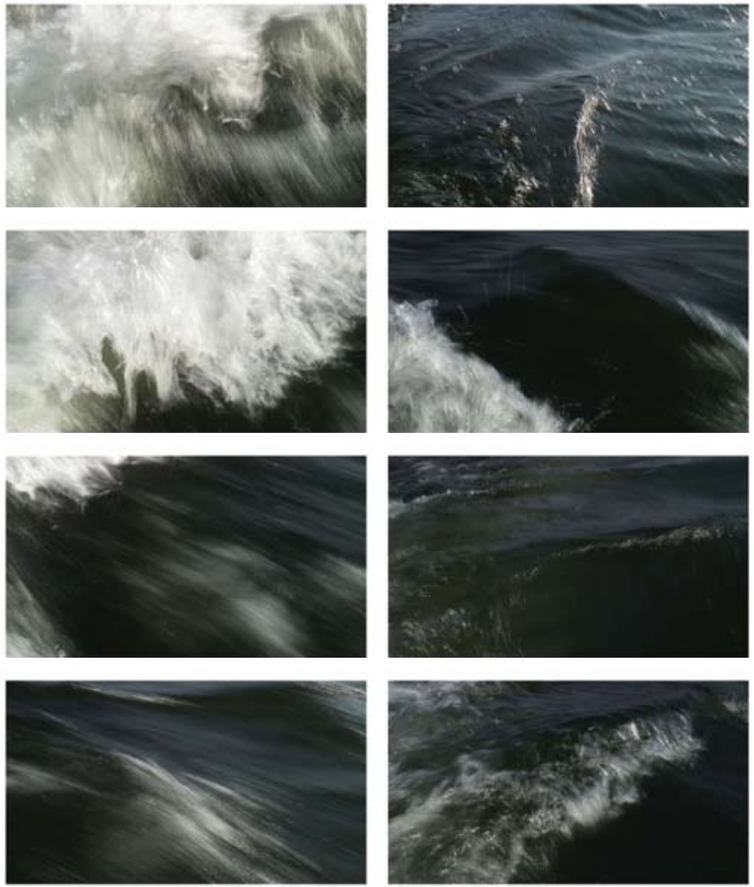

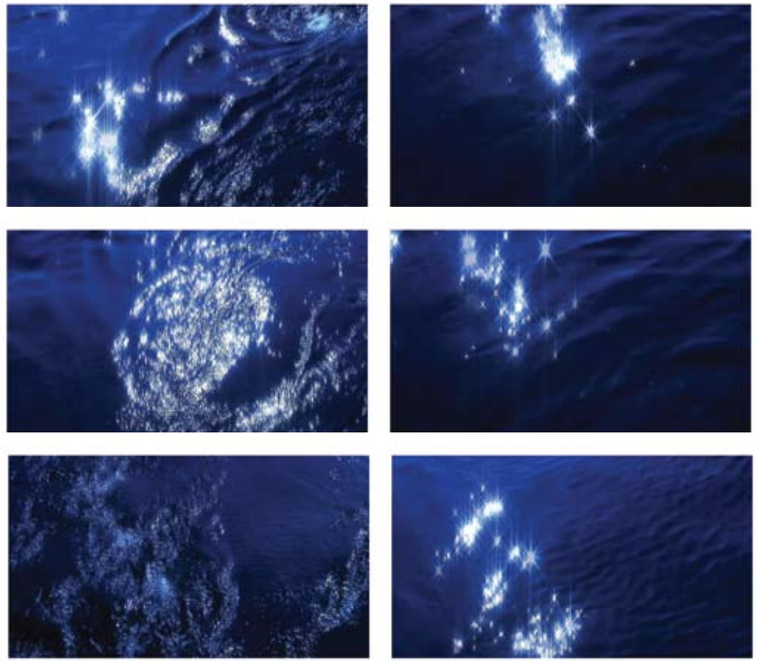

Above: *Videographic Painting: Paris Violet Blue & Magenta,* both 2007, oil, watercolour and graphite on canvas, 150 x 90 cm each, Collection: Amanda & Andrew Love, Sydney
Inside right: *Videographic Painting : Paris Pale Blue,* 2007, oil, watercolour and graphite on canvas, 150 x 190 cm
Inside: *The Thaw,* 2007, digital video, 8 min
Cover: *Wake (Coniston Water)*, 2007, 2 channel digital video, 15 min 16 sec
Flap: *Wake (Windermere)*, 2007, 2 channel digital video, 13 min 43 sec

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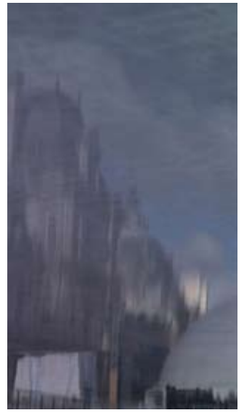
Jess **MacNeil**



Traces of Anonymity

Art will always continue to exert a hold. However, that hold – a fixing in which the eye is encountered and thus within which the work becomes what it is – cannot be effectively separated from the means creating the image. Videos, video images that become photographs, paintings that acknowledge and affirm their relation to their own digital inception define some of the means for image creation within the work of Jess MacNeil. And yet, what is at work within this particular project is as much indebted to the history of the image as it is the mark of art's continual reworking of its own means of production. (A reworking that is part of the transformation of the art object.) MacNeil's extraordinary *Opera House Steps* is a case in point. The work is present as a video, as a potential video still and then is repositioned within paintings. Prior to any comment on this work it is essential to recognize that what it recalls – an act of recall within an almost irresistible inevitability – is Alexander Rodchenko's 1929 photograph *Steps*. Rodchenko's image of a woman holding a child while carrying a shopping basket and walking up stairs (public stairs) inscribes the human subject as central. The medium allowed for little else. Nonetheless, her presence cannot be reduced to the sentimental humanism that marks depiction within both painting and photography. The captured moment stages the complex interplay between anonymity and public presence that marks contemporary urban life and which photography continues to enact. This is the setting in which it is essential to locate MacNeil's *Opera House Steps*. The video holds these steps in place. Movement is the passing shadows. Their presence, the shadows playing over the already fixed steps, does not represent absent figures. Rather, the movement of the shadows, which demands that the steps as the location of the public are held in place, is the continual creation and recreation of what can be described as *particularized anonymity*. As the paintings emerge from the video – the video having become a static image which in turn has become the site of painting – not only is there the obvious connection between different genres of image there is a more profound recognition concerning the relationship between abstraction and anonymity.

Once abstraction is moved beyond its simple and simplistic identification with the negation of the figure, it is redefined as much in relation to the history of

abstraction as to the presence of anonymity. Questions that seek to establish meaning or identity can begin with an original site that is neither confused nor ambiguous. The prompt for such a question would be the anonymous. The problem of identity within a prevailing sense of both anonymity and dislocation is a continual refrain within modernity. The public as a location does not answer such questions it merely relocates them within that further definition of modern subjectivity, namely being-urban. What differentiates MacNeil's investigation and presentation of this condition from Rodchenko's can be located in the effect of different forms of image creation. It is not just MacNeil's video, and the editing techniques it allows, that are important, the inscription of the continuity within the loop creates the effect of a continuity of passage. As the shadows move, the question 'Who moves?' has an insistent quality. The 'who' will always be the potentially particular within the anonymous. Such questions are internal to the effect of the image. In the case of Rodchenko's gelantin-silver print any concern with the next step – her next step and thus the question of who she may be - takes place beyond the image. That such questions are always external in the sense that they demand that the image continue is an effect of the way the image is created. Moreover, abstracting from her presence necessitates effacing the image. MacNeil's image is already an abstraction as it is from the start the presentation of the anonymity, always particularised, of place.

Particularised anonymity is concerned with traces and thus with the interplay of continuity and discontinuity. The traces however are only there as moments that are absorbed or which vanish. Within the medium of video there is the possibility to dwell on the continuity of tracing; a continuity that is defined by the inherent presence of the discontinuous. Of significance however is the twofold dimension that tracing involves. Marks, present as both modifying and disappearing, are only one aspect. The other pertains to that which is being traced. In the case of the *Opera House Steps* the trace of an anonymous Other – anonymous while always particular – endures. As the video loops the inseparability of place and movement is enacted continually. Other recent video works by MacNeil are also concerned with this form of inseparability. However, rather than inscribe the mark of an anonymous Other – there in the fleeting shadows of *Opera House Steps* – in the works *Wake (Coniston Water)* and *Wake (Windermere)* the complex process of passage itself is being staged.

These works both involve a split screen presentation of movement across water. 'Water' named and identified in advance. The movement leaves its mark while the water is itself marked. The latter form of marking involves, in the first instance, water's capacity to reflect. In addition, water is already the registration of wind, currents, etc. (Water is, in part, this registration. What are registered are not there as additions.) In other words, the inherent stability of a body of water is marked by its inherent instability. Both pertain. Hence there is a reiteration of the interplay of continuity and discontinuity. What allows for that interplay to be presented in this instance - and the instance is that which defines the image's specificity – is the relationship between water understood as a complex surface that is videoed and the presentation of that surface by two differentiated yet related screens. The screens present the water at different speeds and having a quality that differs. What differs is, of course, the same. What is the same however is that which can never be the same as itself namely water as a complex surface. Indeed, it is possible to go further and argue that the truth of water as a surface can only ever be staged within a set up that in refusing the literal – namely in refusing what is always thought to be the province of the photographic image – the truth of water, perhaps another 'literal' truth, to be staged. While it cannot be taken up here it is worth reflecting on art's struggles to capture and present the truth of water. Not to represent water but to present it as the site of that which is always working. Even still water is never still since it reflects.

There is a further aspect of both these video works that needs to be noted. What matters in both is the presence of a surface as that which stages. This is not to suggest that the surface can be thought independently of the process of staging. Rather what is revealed is that which opens up the connection between these video works and the practice of painting. (Not painting *tout court* but the practice that MacNeil has been developing.) From the early series *Tenuous Ground* (2003) until the more recent *Videographic Paintings* (2007) MacNeil's concern is with what to paint. Part of the answer can be found in the way the digital or photographic image can be reworked to create the scene of and for painting. As such the surface no longer refers back to a setting there prior to its own creation. Nor, moreover, is the painted – the object encountering the eye – the site of a simple registration. The surface has become a palimpsest of images that while being one cannot be attributed a singular presence. If the water within *Wake (Coniston Water)* and *Wake (Windermere)* can only attain its truth through the refusal of literal presence, then the way the paintings appear to fragment, the way line and colour interplay with figure rather than being the means for its creation, provide a complex surface that enacts a similar refusal. The complexity in question is that which is proper to presentation. What is presented, not represented but presented as such, are the elements that only cohere within a setting in which coherence is the interplay of continuity and discontinuity. The figures and places with her work are neither individuals nor universals. They resist despair and utopianism. They demand a specific response. Her creation of images, a creation that cannot be thought outside the relation of the image to the digital, is the presentation of differing modes of *particularised anonymity*. As such she has become a presenter of modern life.

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