

Catalogue notes for **Dream Shelving by Sam James.**

Title: A Fundamental Liberty?

Self-employment and occupations that lead to the kind of dreams that money can buy, are the keys that drive small businesses. They are the generators of demand, the core so we are told, of the modern economy.

Minto Mall became the attractor in the 1970s for traders and entrepreneurs alike; customers would drive for an hour I was told, travelling from Wollongong to shop and to access services unavailable in the Illawarra. Back then the Minto Mall led the way to the complete retail experience and the early period of consumer culture, the norm today across what we blithely call the 'developed' world.

Few artists have engaged with this popular and influential aspect of our culture, perhaps because it is so very close to our experience of the everyday. The acquisition of goods has become an end in itself, enabling us to exercise a fundamental liberty, the liberty to spend - in pursuit of dreams for the home, the hearth and the table.

Sam James knows the few remaining traders of the Mall and some of those who have departed. The cost of 'development' is often the manipulative shenanigans of property owners, in this case the owners of the Mall who have seen off the big supermarket and many others for neighbouring suburbs. In the almost deserted shell of the building, a kind of mausoleum to consumerism, there is plenty of room for reflection, for visitor and trader alike.

Amongst the retail blight, the visitor encounters the abandoned Australia Post office, with six large screens, an audio environment and a large table, at which sits a friendly looking person or two. People pass the shop, and come and go to the table. I watch the screens in turn, moving on as each of the 5 – 10 minute loops completes. The loops feature one of the trader enterprises: the chicken shop, the milk shake bar, the clothes shop, the optometrist, and the doughnut maker. Voices at the table discuss the daily round, meshing with recordings made with the departed traders playing back in the space; they too recount the daily round.

As past and present fuse in sound, the interpretative present performs on screen. Each professional performer, in their selected Minto (numbered) retail space, moves through the machinations of the job in hand, or some aspect of it, as it used to be. Together with the filmmaker, the performers move through the space and its architectural features: the display cabinet becomes an image cask into which they and their movements are moved. The milk shake proprietor elaborately mixes his brews and we are immersed in his daydreams of swimming and floating in the sea, a sea that floats on the ceiling above the tables which he is now clearing. Within the depths of a dough rolling surface, a rowing boat, a pristine red rowing boat, the kind we encounter in dreams, is rowed by the doughnut and ice-cream assistant across from the bank on which we view the scene towards the opposite wooded shore of this suburban Styx.

Synthesising these elements into a whole, on each screen, across the whole space, requires the consummate skills of Sam James in providing for the performers a filmic backdrop complimenting their own skills. These are no straightforward tasks in the choreographic deployment of digital video resources. Precise use of lighting and its integration with props and other objects, and colour; use of deep and shallow focus, not often seen in video works, provides planes of attention abstracted across the field of view; compositing and superimposition of several layers of recorded image that shift objects of work and of desire from stable surfaces to moments of indeterminate gravity or presence – a washed bowl that lowers itself into a sink; a troupe of articulating clothes racks accompanies a dancer whose dress sense changes scene by scene. Humour and wit are close at hand as the shop chick removes a feather boa from the carcass of the chicken whose breasts had previously been lusciously tickled; the optometrist whose vision is doubled, bifocated, or brought into focus at moments of his greatest desire.

The meeting of filmmaker and performer is of course, the core of the popular cinema experience. We become immersed in interpreting depicted events as they unfold. When the depiction is located in real places rather than the kind constructed in studios, Sam James is following a tradition of documenting real life, established in the earliest days of cinema at the end of the 19th Century. Amongst the oldest archival examples is the departure of workers from the factory in which the Lumiere

brothers invented one of the original film cameras.

In the late 1920s Dziga Vertov and the Kino-Eye collective set out to break away from the stultifying theatre-like feature films in post-Revolutionary Russia and use the impact of fast-cutting, superimposition and 'rapid' camera movement to introduce a dynamic element into the cinematic experience, provoking the audience to reflect upon, not only the experience of the new media of the day, but also the combination of elements documenting the new society many of the Soviets were seeking to build. The reflexive response from an active rather than passive audience, was what Vertov and the filmmakers who followed, were seeking to create. In Britain the GPO Film Unit commissioned work by, among others, Humphrey Jennings, an artist who like Sam James, employed re-enactment in the documenting of working peoples lives. A colleague was also commissioned, Len Lye, a New Zealander, to make public service announcements; he worked mainly in the editing room, combining multiple images with music tracks, stretching the process of colourful and lively image manipulation to the limit, for its day.

These filmmakers used the moving image to document with a sense of optimism the development of the new social order, of equity and access to services and material well being. Dream Shelving may well be part of, (using the moving image tool of the day, the computer-based video file), the documentation of the corruption of such post-War ideals. In the never ending chase after national economic growth, we can observe the distorting effect of consumerism and unimpeded development by the few, is at the expense of the many. How much bigger can the beanstalk grow, we wonder, before it becomes terminally unsustainable?

This is a physical cinematic practice, based on the physicality of place and the dynamics of context. The performers and activities develop as a series of durational and movement elements, approaching Deleuze's discussions of Cinema and the terms movement-image and time-image. The first term is the series of actions that relay the intent of the narrative – the daily round of work. The second term can be applied to the fragments of moving image recording the events, the performances witnessed, the complexity of the images, whose indistinct appearance demand active attention from the viewer. Though these time-images are different from the kind Deleuze described as existing in art house cinema, the moments in the Mall of

the cinematic experience move rapidly between function and use; as Deleuze suggested, “A flickering brain, which re-links or creates loops – this is cinema” (Deleuze, 1985).

These thoughts flow from a troupe of performers and a filmmaker whose approach to the task in hand exploit traditions of realist and fantastic expression, hanging, as it were, amongst the architectural elements of the Mall. Bringing to the surface, making visible what we accept as an everyday, but cannot see as a movement away from a personal daily round, toward occupations that in reality are determined by persons distant from the places we inhabit.

Shopping and shopkeeping to occupy our allotted time? Or more creative approaches to the realisation of who we are, in fact or in fantasy? Sam James elegantly juxtapositions the spaces and times assembled here, in amongst the Dream Shelving.

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