

Review: Stillness is the Move: Frozen Frames in Thornton Walker

by Lesley Chow (Artinfo.com.au November 2011)

Outstanding works on paper are seen in a pair of shows by Thornton Walker: *The Stillness in Movement* at Beaver Galleries, and *The Stillness* at Scott Livesey Galleries in Melbourne. Walker has created a series based on paused film clips and photos taken by his father in 1930s Canada; the images depict a shadowy figure running through the snow. These pictures show chaotic, frantic movement from a perspective of silence and stillness. They might be outtakes from the recent Jerzy Skolimowski film *Essential Killing*, in which an abstract figure is pursued through a white landscape.

How can a chase sequence imply stillness? Despite the context of an action thriller, Walker captures the body as it rests within a running motion; each of these figures is a still eye within a maelstrom of activity. The men shuffle their heels and kick up drifts of snow, but these are only momentary flashes beside the stately forward movement of the body. Our focus is on the weight of the black torso, from which shadows of peripheral action emerge. The body in *Falling Man* is a dark liquid shape with traces of radiance around the edges, showing the build-up of intensity over time. Many moments crystallise around a common locus, so that even a heroic individual act is governed by a central impassivity.



Most of these works imply dead silence, as if a chase scene is being watched from a distance, or at a later point in time when the heat of events has cooled off. From a narrative point of view, these actions have no consequence; we are unaffected by the motives or destiny of the protagonist. As in *Essential Killing*, a film which uncovers a puzzling silence at the heart of violence, the figures in Walker are somewhat arbitrary. In the painting *The Watcher*, events are perceived with a detached eye. An imposing figure appears by the shore, but instead of provoking curiosity, the reality of his presence is questioned. It is hard to see where this man actually stands: his outline is a cluster of silhouettes. Given his threatening posture, we might anticipate danger, but there is no immediacy here. At the centre of his body, three dimensions have locked into two: an action figure has become a flat panel of detail, with opaque patches forming over its surface.

Two Figures by the Sea has men anxiously launching a boat during a storm, but as the title suggests, the picture is static and unhurried; it seems to be a work committed at leisure. These men are propelled by urgency and risk, but as a result of inhabiting the same stance for too long, their images have begun to congeal. The surface of the paint has become textured and decorative, like the pattern of a Nabi work.

These canvases are like sensors which calmly register human activity: even though his subjects are frenzied, the artist paints and draws as if he has all the time in the world. Bodies represent a condensation of different moments, and action is paused to the point where it becomes marbled. Discovering moments of rest and cool within exertion reflects a zen which has preoccupied Walker for years. The artist cultivated his interest in frozen moments for a 2007 self-titled show at Christine Abrahams Gallery, in which canvases are swirled with patterns of radiating lines. That series remains one of his most remarkable achievements, and it is especially relevant in the context of his current work with stillness.

In the 2007 paintings, giant fingers appear to have swept along a canvas, creating a system of fine white lines. The suggestion is that Walker has used a unique identifier as his brush: every skin contour is visible, implying a concentration so intense that traces of flesh might be embedded in the paint. The patterns of white on brown can also be viewed in terms of sand-scraping in Japanese gardens: each trail might be the result of an immersive stroke, an act of pacifying and meditation. Either way, the artist has reaped rewards for his efforts. In each of these works, an immaculate little bowl pops up. While the hand is focused on making its mark, a perfect object has materialised: a finely turned, functional tea-bowl. This object hovers over the abstract canvas; sometimes pairs of bowls are present, giving the illusion of tinkling like bells. Why have these items emerged? Applying thoughtful, systematic pressure results in the miraculous arrival of an object

from a different era. Each bowl is startling to the eye, like a philosophical surprise which comes after hours of deliberation. As lines swerve from one edge to another, the bowl is at the whorl of the finger-sweep, creating a central stillness in the modular movement.



So what is the significance of a bowl? In several pictures, Walker creates a sense of the bowl as by-product, something left behind or stimulated into appearing. In *Early Showers*, a white splodge oozes a few drops as it moves away from a bowl. As such, the bowl is left as a deposit of the amoeba-like blob which has slunk off. However, the blob itself is equally the centre of attention: it cools the painting like a dollop of cream. A dab of white eases and lightens the canvas; it looks milky on the clay-coloured surface.

From that series to *The Stillness in Movement*, Walker creates enormous, restful shapes which eclipse small flickers of action. Each work represents an imprint of human activity, but it is a system where movements bloom and fade around a perceived centre. The work is about huge hands and tiny motions: within a vast, abstract scale, a single brush sweeps contentedly along.

The Stillness
Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne
28 Sep to 22 Oct 2011

The Stillness in Movement
Beaver Galleries, Canberra
24 Mar to 12 Apr 2011