

Articles

A Memory, By Chance

Dr. Clarissa Ball

The term peripatetic comes to mind when thinking about Sue Rees and her work. Like a late nineteenth century traveller Rees constantly traverses the world. But, rather than seeking out the secrets of unknown lands to inform her work, Rees produces work that appears to disregard her ever-changing sense of place. What is striking about Rees's work is that it seems to displace the very idea of place, and yet place itself, moving from hither to thither, straying and drifting, location and dislocation, is absolutely central to her body of work. For just as Rees lives a peripatetic, perhaps even nomadic life, so too her work.

Rees's work is rarely still. Indeed, one of the characteristics of her work is that it is in a constant state of motion. Her objects take on an ambulatory life as they slither and sidle, and shuffle and stroll their way through the space of the gallery. Windows open and shut, billiard cues move from side to side, hats move up and down, shoe-lasts repetitively pace, umbrellas unfold and retract and books enticingly disclose their text before momentarily closing. These well-travelled objects, en route to nowhere, are permanently trapped in an intermediary position for while oscillating between past and present and future, they are simultaneously mapping out a territory that Rees so carefully delineates for them.

The objects that Rees employs in her work, the hats and shoe lasts, the gloves and spectacles, are, of course, adjuncts to the human body. Moreover, such objects are, at some point, dependent on the human body for their existence, meaning and use-value. And, under normal circumstances, it is the human being that sets these objects into motion. Rees however, liberates these objects from such dependence. Through a range of mechanical interventions she propels these objects into an animate existence so that they endlessly rehearse their delicately circumscribed roamings. Never quite being able to move beyond their allotted spaces, Rees's objects retreat at the moment of their arrival.

Given that these objects devote their existence to boundary-marking and to setting the limits of their spatial existence, it is not surprising that so many of the objects which Rees selects are those that human beings deploy to dramatise their own bodily edges. The umbrellas and wooden spoons and the knives and forks in *Depositories of Deeds*, are quite literally extensions of one's bodily limits which, in enabling the body to function beyond its own corporeal edges, redefine and shift those edges. Similarly, in the installation *Capped off at 6 per 60*, in which Rees used eighteen different hats that were suspended upside-down from the gallery ceiling and moved up and down via a series of strings and pulleys. A seemingly innocent accessory, the hat, in all its various guises and functions, has always served to draw attention to the body, to mark out or cap-off the contours of the intellect, which in turn, is very often understood to be expressed and revealed in one's choice of head gear. Not only does the hat extend and envelop the head, it metaphorically figures the intellect, and, as both alibi and lure, as both stigma and status symbol, it is loaded with symbolic possibilities. It is these possibilities, these endless and circuitous chains of association that are sparked by a seemingly 'ordinary' object, which are of interest to Rees. And, it is in this way that Rees reveals her fundamental interest in the human being, for these metonymic chains of association always lead back to the human presence.

The human figure, although entirely absent from Rees's sculptural and installation work, is consistently granted a presence that is invoked by the very nature of the objects themselves. One cannot look at the objects Rees uses without thinking about their broader human context: the hat and the glove, the billiard cue and the spectacles, will always suggest the human. This shadowy, ghost-like presence haunts Rees's objects and the spaces they inhabit, moving as they do, independently of human will. In this way, by working across and within the tensions that exist between presence and absence, by generating presence out of absence, Rees is able to deploy these objects as sites of exchange where memories and associations, both fictitious and real, collide.

Rees's most recent work, *Memory of Coming and Going* (2000), is a site specific installation located in the Cullity Gallery at the School of Architecture and Fine Arts at The University of Western Australia. Constructed out of a variety of salvaged materials such as bits of tin and wooden skirting boards, this large square room, which Rees affectionately terms 'my box', stands on four metal legs that raise the structure off the floor. A window punctuates each of the four walls and each window is of a different size and is positioned at varying heights in the walls.

Memory of Coming and Going is one of many works in which Rees has incorporated windows. Indeed, in early 2000, a few months before completing *Memory of Coming and Going*, Rees had produced a piece titled *Comings and Goings* at the Stanley Picker Gallery in Kingston in the United Kingdom. This work also contained windows, as did her earlier works *Double Take* and *Specific Views*. In all of these installation pieces the windows are mechanically propelled into action so that they continuously open and shut.

The duality of the window, its existence on the threshold between interior and exterior, private and public, materiality and immateriality, concealment and revelation, confinement and liberation, has fascinated Rees for some time. But Rees intervenes in these fertile paradoxes by insisting on incorporating windows that are in a constant state of opening

and closing. If the window is, above all else, a framing device, an object that allows one to fix and render a view specific, that enables one to position oneself in relation to what lies on the other side of the window, then this is not the function of Rees's apertures. Just as the books in *Obiter Dicta* open and close so as to prevent readability, the windows in works such as *Memory of Coming and Going* and in the ironically titled *Specific Views*, render the picturable, unpicturable. As the windows of these installations intrude into the space of the spectator, they actively prevent a contemplative view of the interior, and, in so doing, they inhibit the potential for specular dominance over what lies beyond. Thus it is that in constructing a location that is a site for sight, and by mischievously disrupting our positional relationship to both, Rees dislodges and displaces the customary associations between sight and place. It is in this sense, that place in Rees's work, becomes secondary to its framing.