Meditation on an untitled video (an artist's studio)

By Stella Ramage

Click. Humm once again the small screen fills with a monochrome

video sequence of an old-fashioned room. A bare canvas stands on an

easel. A dust sheet part-draping its surface gives the canvas-plus-easel

structure a statuesque, sculptural look. Light flows in through a grid of

windowpanes on the right. There is a mild, dusty clutter of painting

paraphernalia behind and before. An artist's studio. The camera whirrs

steadily. Nothing moves. Nothing happens. Time holds its breath.

Click. The screen reverts to white. Pause, two, three, four

Click. Humm ... once again the small screen fills with a monochrome

video sequence of an old-fashioned room ...

Lesson one: time repeats.

In the Adam Art Gallery's Four Times Painting exhibition, Julian

Dashper's untitled video is set up at the end of an avenue of neo-

minimalist canvases. In fifteen-second bursts, the preserved studio of

Thomas Hart Benton is displayed, interspersed by fifteen seconds of

whiteness. The rhythmic off and on, the audible click and whirr, give

the work a hypnotic quality underlined by the quiet gallery space. At

first I thought the blank screen was shown more briefly than the

studio: I estimated ten seconds of whiteness to perhaps twice as long

for the room. Only when I timed it with my watch's second hand did I

realise my mistake.

Lesson two: the pace of time is slippery, inconstant.

Click. The empty screen glows white. Breathe once. Breathe twice.

Click. Humm ...once again the small screen fills. Here is a riddle: what is the difference between a fifteen second video sequence of a room where nothing moves and a still from the same scene gazed upon for the same duration? Hard to say; nonetheless there is a perceptible, palpable difference. The room seems to hold its breath, waiting. Time oozes slow as syrup here in this space of memory, but is not sliced, crystalline and frozen like a photograph.

Lesson three: time seems to have a mass and presence all its own, independent of motion.

Click. The screen reverts to white. Pause, two, three, four

Click. Humm ... Thomas Hart Benton was a regionalist artist of the American mid-West, a socialist painter of rural life and agricultural work. His sheep-herders, ploughmen and wheat harvesters are hard-edged, visionary, lyrical. Setting his face against abstraction, he believed that the land was the backbone and salvation of the American working class. He was reviled by some for his defiant defence of realism.

Time stopped for him one evening as he prepared the very canvas we see on screen. His Missouri studio has been preserved, shrine-like, as he left it.

Lesson four: time sometimes stops without warning.

Click. The empty screen glows white. Breathe once. Breathe twice.

Click. Humm ...Benton is best known now for having taught Jackson Pollock – another for whom time stopped suddenly one night. Benton's influence, however, was reactive: despite their shared socialism within the Art Students League, Pollock rejected rural sentiment and was determined to paint as little like his erstwhile teacher as possible. So

Benton's wider fame rests, ironically, on the reflected glow from one whose burning urban expressionism rejected his own hick lyricism. There is further irony in the fact that Benton, though eclipsed by the brilliant lights of New York, outlived Pollock by nearly two decades, his unfashionable regionalism meandering persistently, like a country creek alongside the fast flowing river of mainstream modernism.

Lesson five: time flows at different speeds, along different channels, a network of braided criss-crossing streams.

Click. The screen reverts to white. Pause, two, three, four

Click. Humm ... In Aotearoa, with our long love affair with landscape, Benton's work has arguably had a greater resonance than Pollock's. New Zealand's modernism has comfortably embraced our Bentonesque regionalists, Angus, Lusk and Sutton. Perhaps we've been less prone here to promote one modernism as *the* Modernism.

Click. White. Light. What is the relationship between that empty canvas trapped in time and the empty screen that is here right now? Dashper has chosen to give them equal weight. Equivalence of possibility, perhaps, or the imminence of change, as Roger Horrocks in the exhibition catalogue suggests.

Click. Humm ... Or perhaps equivalence of medium? Dashper shows us a still/moving image that is simultaneously painting, sculpture, installation and video. Dashper himself refuses to be constrained by any one medium, but makes playful combinations and conversations between them. As he continually demonstrates in his work, all art is conceptual art. Caught in the breath between an end and who-knowswhat beginning, this video loop reminds us that there are other modernisms, alternative pasts, many possible futures.

Postscript:

Leaving that repeating heartbeat to play on alone, I move on, through to Shane Cotton's area. But the strange acoustics of the gallery means that the slow, regular click-hum of Dashper's video mechanism from the other space is still just audible. In the gloom, amidst tossed and tumbling birds and looming ancestral heads, the sound makes a soft metronomic counterpoint that somehow clicked with Cotton's contemporary electronic overlay projected over the weight of history and memory. Press Play.