

# The Specious Present

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Art History (Honors)

The present moment – that tantalizing sense of time between past and future - forever fleeting, ephemeral and elusive. Time is always passing. This is the theme upon which *The Specious Present* is based.

The first work one encounters in the exhibition is Colin McCahon's *Walk (Series C)*, which spans two walls of the gallery. The painting references a walk taken by McCahon along Muriwai beach and through its long form and placement on two walls, encourages us to re-enact this walk, as we start at the beginning of the work and physically move along it. The depiction of the beach throughout the work also suggests weather conditions ranging from clear to hazy, this variability suggesting the changeable nature of the present. The fourteen panels of the work are also affixed with roman numerals indicating the fourteen Stations of the Cross, which in referencing Christ's journey to his crucifixion also indicate the passing of time. The anchoring structure of the horizon line, which is depicted throughout the work, provides an effective contrast to this, suggesting a constancy and the possibility to just *be* in this moment. *Walk (Series C)* also pays homage to McCahon's friend James K. Baxter after his death, with Baxter/Jesus' spirit on its way to Te Rerenga Wairua in the last panel of the work, in the form of a flock of birds. Time in this work is represented as a continuum via movement, and yet by stepping back we also experience these present moments simultaneously. Similarly, in John Davidson's words, there is an "eternal or everlasting present"<sup>1</sup> in this work, thirty years of friendship having been "frozen in time."<sup>2</sup>

McCahon's *The Days and Nights in the Wilderness Showing the Constant Flow of Light Passing into a Dark Landscape* is also well placed at the end of a long passage, high white walls on either side of it. Movement is again integral to this painting, as we approach it from afar in a manner approaching a ritual, speaking to the conflation of art, nature and religion so integral to McCahon's work. Again, the changeability of weather is represented here through the various tones in the work which are contrasted with the heavy structure of a tau cross, an interplay suggestive of time as immediately present and yet constantly in motion. The work also references light in

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<sup>1</sup> Emeritus Professor John Davidson, lecture at the Adam Art Gallery, 8 August, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the text affixed to it: 'The days and nights in the wilderness, showing the constant flow of light passing into a dark landscape', in this way the changing nature of light in the environment indicates the passing of time. Both this painting and *Walk (Series C)* are evocative of the sense of time and presence which nature evokes. I am never so *here* as when I feel that natural environment around me – the blustering wind, a body of water constantly in motion. McCahon brings this moment to life through his paintings within the context of that other contemplative environment, the art gallery.

Keith Tyson's *Art-Machine Iteration: Angelmaker Part 1: 15 Seconds Prior to Apocalypse, 100 Views* features a series of 15 second clips shown on an old television set. We see people smiling, reading, walking, talking – a couple embracing, two teenagers smoking, a man reading a book on a train. Objects are revealed in all their objectness – be it milk forming a cloud in a cup of black coffee, a CD player bathed in red light, or an extreme close up of a curtain. And environments, such as the wind blowing through a tree's leaves and kites gliding silently across a grey sky, are allowed to breathe. This is everyday banality, on an old, analogue TV – no surround sound (or any sound at all for that matter), and no high definition LCD screen aestheticizing these images. And yet, there's something undeniably beautiful in the banality of this work and the intimacy this small screen facilitates. This preciousness is undoubtedly facilitated by the title, which indicates that each of these 15 second clips are the last 15 seconds of human existence on earth. These are scenes we've all seen before – or feel like we have. The *feeling* of being in a bar with friends, of seeing someone reading on the bus, of bright sunlight making patterns through plastic chairs. These moments as we individually experience them are all different. And yet they all share a striking resemblance. In this way Tyson universalizes the human experience - these are our lives that are ceaselessly occurring all the time. Through taking the normalcy of this, monumentalizing it and imbuing it with stillness and quiet, Tyson allows us to sit back and, for a moment, genuinely experience and appreciate it.

Hummel's work *TIMEX*, provides a sonic corollary to Tyson's *Angelmaker*, given its similar preoccupation with the ordinary. The work contains everyday sounds such as birdcalls, a mechanical drill and radio static, intermingled with a 120bpm static pulse, the average heartbeat of a brisk walk. A productive tension is created between time as structured and linear on the one hand and chaotic and multiple on the other.

David Claerbout's work considers the multiplicity of the present moment in a manner similar to Tyson. The series of images we see capture a single moment in time from a variety of different perspectives on a beach in Brittany. These images are reflected off a shiny, black parquet floor, which echoes the reflective nature of the Brittany beach at low tide. Again a fracture in the nature of time as it is usually experienced is created, as one enters the dark space to be enveloped in these images. Through experiencing this single moment via the 32 minute long piece, one comes to better understand the fragmented nature of time and of experience – in any one given chronological, geographically situated moment, there are thousands of different perspectives. A moment is not singular, but plural, and infinitely so. *The Quiet Shore* enables us to embody the present moment in a completely novel way – we are gifted the time to examine this scene from every possible angle, in all its nuance and multiplicity.

Andrew Beck has used photograms to produce the works in his series *After Image*. Objects (alternately sheets of paper, timber or glass panes) were placed directly onto photographic paper to produce an analogue photograph, without the aid of a camera. There is something quite poetic about the forms that Beck subsequently produced, which are combined with elements of painting and sculpture in his 'drawing with light'<sup>3</sup>. That the work has been created for the Adam is evident in the organic way in which it situates itself in the gallery. While not explicitly site-specific, Beck's largest work, *Shadow Strips Cascades*, which spans one wall of the gallery, consists of a sequence wherein each subsequent piece of paper is a photogram of the last. Similarly, the work plays off the strip of light in the architecture to its right. Beck calls this a "sub-site specific work"<sup>4</sup> - created in his studio and playing off the space, although not created explicitly within and in response to it. In any case, its placement across the large gallery wall and the manner in which each piece of paper relates to the next, suggests the notion of time through providing evidence of a process, as well as a movement across space. The same can be said of *Linear Split (8 Phases)* where, as with McCahon's *Walk (Series C)*, you move along the piece, tracing time with your

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek root for the word 'photography'

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Beck artist's talk, Adam Art Gallery, July 12, 2015

movement – although in this case the work overtly directs you with its pointed arrows. Simultaneously, the impression of these objects onto photographic paper captures only a split second in time when Beck exposed light to them – the present moment is literally captured with light.

*The Specious Present* is an exhibition sparsely hung and yet rich in content, the austerity of its curation facilitating a quiet contemplation in keeping with the philosophically dense theme of time and how we can experience it via painting, photography, video, installation and sound as variously multiple, singular, structured, chaotic, stationary and constantly on the move. Simultaneously, stillness threads its way through this show and in each of these works time seems to stop, or at least slow down; the present moment extends, stretches out and allows us to occupy it more fully. It is thus that we are able to occupy this specious present – at least for a time.