



BETWEEN TIMES

Jason Dee

Text by Kim Olynyk

In these works, Jason Dee investigates the revealing and recording functions behind film and photography. He explores the ways narrative, medium, and technology work to re-establish physical existence, meaning, and cultural production. In a profoundly strange and disorienting way, Dee's work takes the phenomenal and ontological world of classical narrative and early cinema and juxtaposes twentieth-century cinema techniques read against twenty-first century technological and digital transformations.

Dee engages in a discussion on the possibilities, (mis) readings, and interpretations within the plasticity of the apparatus, well-known photographic scenes, and classical narratives themselves. As a part of this dialogue, Dee includes the viewer's experiences of the works as a larger part of the narrativizing and representation that goes on within them. He circumnavigates our own phenomenological experience of the work and through displacement and de-familiarizing the familiar or taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary, he discloses the role of spectator subjectivity and looks at our transparent I's/eyes that govern interpretation. Dee's deliberate play with viewer expectations becomes his way of interrogating the role of spectator subjectivity. Through auditory and visual puns, which proliferate alongside of constant negotiation and plays between signifying systems, Dee manipulates temporality as well as spatiality by re-framing, and using tableaux, cut-outs, back projections, and movement versus stills and freeze frames. Consequently, Dee uncannily queries meaning and signification behind the representations of

emotions. His work travels behind the apparatus itself and challenges the nature of emotion, and what a face reveals ideologically. This reframing works at unhinging his viewer, and through a profound study of facial expression and gesture, Dee casts doubt on whether or not such expressions are universal or innate. Cultural memory and nostalgia are themes embedded within his unique style and the aestheticization of phenomena itself central to his oeuvre.

In *We'll Revisit the Scenes of Our Youth* (2004), Dee cuts out a scene from the famous Max Ophüls film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and represents its characters symbolically as a way of commenting on cultural production and the study of subject and subjectivity. Ophüls' original narrative is now challenged as a fixed product of our cultural memory. In this cut-out still of Joan Fontaine and Louis Jordan, Dee reconsiders what the recording function of a camera can reveal behind the face to face, especially when the actors are re-presented in a new context and both frozen in time, but within a new narrative space. Here Dee questions the nature of emotion, expressions of immediacy, and how the viewer interprets emotion through the work of so-called symbolic and meaningful expression. Furthermore, he calls into matter the nature of expression and codification. His work reveals a vast signifying system embedded in the perpetual re-production and re-presentation of the symbolic behind cultural production.

Within the short but emotionally loaded single and dual-channel video pieces included in this exhibition, Dee captures his audience with visually unsettling yet haunting and beautifully framed puns on the act of perception. The film scenes contain self-reflexive elements such as back projections, or recording devices, referencing obsolete technologies and the worlds they capture. These scenes appear dislocated, sealed off in space and time, with the actors occupying them caught in a state of limbo. Old films are repositories of societal memories, and by using software to dissolve their fixed surface, Dee reveals ghost worlds, echoing up from a bedrock of universal human desires and fears: love, transcendence, isolation and death.

In *We'll Revisit the Scenes of Our Youth*, he juxtaposes and shifts between the camera's recording functions and revealing functions, which invokes a feeling of

alienation in the viewer. The split screen and dual narratives disorient her. She vacillates between the two narrative spaces. We are drawn to Joan Fontaine's face and physiognomy, but it is not what the camera or still cut-out captures on her face that remains unsettling; rather, the camera reveals a deeper anxiety and fear behind the actresses' face. Dee reframes and represents her in a new, but disquieting narrative space, manipulating the original temporal space and narrative fixity of the original film through cut-and-paste, her face and expression convey a new designation or meaning that profoundly disturbs us. Her physique no longer helps to establish a dramatic interest in the original plot of the movie. The moving storybook landscape that Dee projects behind the pair on the train create a feeling of nostalgia and a desire in the viewer to return to the moment, to the scene, and speaks to our collective desire to remain fixed in the past, but which the swooning back projection disavows. Here Dee discloses new aspects of ontological reality. In part because any singular and cohesive classical narrative meaning has been displaced; and also by our attempts to hold onto the original narrative context and memory of her character, and even Louis Jordan seated across from her on the train car no longer serves our cultural memory in the same way that we initially remembered him.

In *That's All* (2005), Dee uses the idea of interrogation as both an extended metaphor and visual pun. Immediately, the humming auditory soundtrack of moving tape reels creates an anxiety and agitation in the viewer. His use of the split screen and dual narrative spaces provoke a desire to read the work in a totalizing and cohesive way, and yet the work refuses a comfortable or singular interpretation. He manipulates us through physiological response, and the work of mimicry and mirroring, to reflect back on the obsolete technology and apparatus itself. The narrative above reveals an interrogation of a subject but really the interrogation is within the viewer and Dee's self-reflexive commentary on technical and hidden aspects of the mediums transparent surfaces located ideologically in the recording functions of the technology itself.

Dee's work here draws from classical film theorists Béla Balázs, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Kracauer, in "The Establishment of Physical Existence" from *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1952) wrote

on what we can discover about ourselves through a study of *recording functions* versus *revealing functions* in the cinema. For Kracauer, film differs from photographs in two respects: "they represent reality as it evolves in time; and they do so with the aid of cinematic techniques and devices" The recording functions include film standards such as the chase, dancing, nascent motion, and the way in which the camera records inanimate objects. The *revealing functions* are far more interesting, and belong to that nuanced realm in the world of images where things normally unseen are brought to the surface and made transparent.

In a formalist way, Dee has masterfully probed how film and digital photography, as well as twenty-first century technologies, play with physical reality. In *That's All* (2005) Dee created an entirely new language when discussing the establishment of physical existence by marrying obsolete technologies within a new formalism. It is those very things that we do not normally observe, or things generally not made available to the human eye or ear, which are brought out by Dee's playful *mise-en-scenes*, the ideological implications of the apparatus itself, and his self-reflexive probe of looping and repetitions. By interrogating the recording and revealing functions of the apparatus *That's All* (2005) becomes a very funny commentary on the ways in which the recording functions can establish physical existence and manipulate the viewer ideologically. Dee creates through his own re-imaginings, and language play, new signifying systems and cultural memories. His work takes up temporality and corporeality through a teasing out of the transient, also better understood as those moments when fleeting images provide us with impression, where a film can capture and lure the spectator through a character's inner preoccupations and intimate thoughts, strategically found behind the actor's surface expression.

Dee establishes that there is never a singular, total subject that can be read or an ideal viewer. His work remains open to multiple interpretations, readings, mis-readings and possibilities. His tableaux, *mise-en-scenes*, and split screens have a way of disintegrating familiar objects and bringing others to the fore, creating new and fascinating interrelationships. Dee deliberately makes us take notice of objects that we might not normally or ordinarily take heed. Often he takes the familiar and deliberately subverts it in his

work. In this way he draws attention to how we incorporate objects and perceive them. He alienates us by deliberately taking the formal elements of a work and making them reappear strange, or by distorting them. And by reframing these images and rewriting classical narratives, and representing them in new contexts, we are forced to look at the works differently and notice the too familiar to recognize.

In *Her Celluloid Self* (2004) Dee reconceptualizes the familiar only to de-familiarize and make strange that which was once a coherent and classical narrative about an aging and vain film star who nobody remembers. Ironically, Dee cleverly shows that Norma Desmond remains forever imprinted on us as a cultural icon on the celluloid itself. Here Dee takes the famous Norma Desmond of *Sunset Boulevard* and works with the idea of frames within frames; he aestheticizes nostalgia. The background scene is littered with snapshot frames surrounding her. Dee asks us to think more deeply about our habits and prejudices or at least he asks us to consider the ways in which we perceive. A camera is able to represent acts of violence, terror, sexual perversity and death in ways unlike any other medium. Dee marries in *Her Celluloid Self* (2004) the cinematic and digital photograph.

Dee interrogates physical existence in a new way through this very odd relationship between the play of film and photography, and his use of digital media; his reframes of old cinematic footage alter our world viewed. This newly materialized meetings of different media and newly evacuated space and time seems to be at the heart of Jason Dee's capricious and uncanny juxtapositions. His work, bordering on the art of nostalgia, seems to depend on fleeting impressions, and dislocated sceneries. Because film has the ability to expose physical reality and Dee's works speak on a Meta level of abstraction, his reframes can be said to create agitations in the viewer. Dee distorts the viewer's comfortable state. He purposefully creates pieces that displace logical viewer expectations. Dee's reframing and frozen cut-out scene from *Sunset Boulevard*, and the image of Norma Desmond, the classical Hollywood maven, whose career degenerated by the end of her life into a mocking portrayal of debauched Hollywood glamour, says it all.

[Kim Olynyk]

Jason Dee was born in Sunderland, northern England. He studied photography at Northumbria University and completed an MFA at Glasgow School of Art, where he now works. He has exhibited widely in Britain, Europe and North America, and is currently undertaking a residency at Stills Photography Gallery in Edinburgh. With several solo exhibitions under his belt over the last five years, his most recent group shows include: *Recontres Internationales Centre Pompidou, Paris*; *Out of Darkness, Kultursentrum K4-Nürnberg*; *Fur Coat and No Knickers, Arnolfini, Bristol* and *Won't Get Fooled Again, Café Gallery London*. <www.jasondee.co.uk>

Kim Olynyk majored in Film Studies and she received her BA from the University of Manitoba. She began an MA in literature at Simon Fraser University, but received her Masters at the University of Western Ontario from the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism. Her doctoral work bridged two genres in American Literary Naturalism and Film Noir. Her special areas include tragic narratives, psychiatry and the cinema, existentialism and film theory. She is currently teaching at the universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba in the Departments of Film, Literature, Rhetoric and Philosophy.

EXHIBITION

Thursday, 18 December 2008–
Saturday, 31 January 2009

RECEPTION

7 PM, Thursday, 18 December 2008

WORKS EXHIBITED

We'll Revisit The Scenes of Our Youth (2004)
We're going for a trip across the water (2006)
Her Celluloid Self (2004)
That's all (2005)

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121-100 Arthur Street (Artspace), Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 1H3 | 204.942.8183 FAX 204.942.1555
info@platformgallery.org www.platformgallery.org