

Chris Bennie | A Wee Sunset

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Text Dr Jess Berry





Production image of filming near Glenorchy, Queensland. Photograph Nicola Chatham

A Zip on the Horizon

Dr Jess Berry

Searching for the monumental in everyday experience has been a repeated theme in Christopher Bennie's video works. In his pursuit of authenticity and familiarity Bennie reveals the sublime through encounters with lost moments in time however this experience is often piquant with unsettling aspects of voyeurism, narcissism and naivety. *A Wee Sunset* (2009) demonstrates Bennie's continued interest in the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. The video begins with an image of a dust-laden orange sky and climaxes with the silhouette of the artist's urination. The reverie of this childish act reveals the concurrent appreciation and critique of the sublime that underlies much of Bennie's work. As the artist explains, "with tongue in cheek the video exemplifies as well as repudiates romanticism in favour of a profound and leaky existence"¹.

The sublime encapsulates an array of experiences including, awe, beauty, terror the uncanny, the unknown and the divine. It is an imprecise term that can be applied equally to art and nature. In fact, the painting of monumental landscapes seems to be one of the ways that the sublime is most often expressed. While *A Wee Sunset* clearly draws on the association between nature and the sublime there is also an articulation of painting that seems to underpin this work. In particular, by examining Bennie's video in relation to the work of the Abstract Expressionists, Barnett Newman and Robert Motherwell this connection is elucidated more precisely.

On an aesthetic level there is a similarity between the opening shot of *A Wee Sunset* and the colour-field paintings of Barnett Newman. Bennie's framing of the glowing orange sky bisected by the black line of the horizon calls to mind Newman's visually sparse, large scale canvases awash with ochre and brownish red hues dramatically contrasted with a vertical line breaking the surface.

Newman's works, like many other colour-field paintings, highlight the two-dimensionality of the pictorial space through their flat consideration of colour. However, Newman disrupts this colour-field with the 'zip' or narrow band of contrasting colour. The result is a fissure of the pictorial plane. The surface tension that Newman creates can be seen as a form of the sublime achieved in the confrontation between the 'zip' and the void of the colour-field. Art historian, Paul Crowther explains the analogy evident in Newman's paintings, "just as the zip is properly defined and comprehensible only through its opposition to the colour-field, so humankind can only define and express its own finite rational nature in opposition to the infinite and unknown"². Crowther's explanation of Newman's work suggests that these paintings express humanity's relationship to the sublime while simultaneously embodying the sublime.

Like Newman's paintings, Bennie's video is a confrontation between the artist and the unknown where the 'zip' of urination across the frame of the glowing sky is the moment that the artist is able to define himself in relation to the landscape he challenges. In this way, Bennie critiques our appreciation of the sublime through what appears to be an act of contempt yet also demonstrates his recognition of the sublime through a gesture that suggests self-comprehension.

The experience of self-comprehension was explored by the key philosopher of the sublime, Edmund Burke. He considered a condition of the sublime to be the effect on the spectator's mind of being dominated by an immense object or to be in awe of the divine³. In many ways Bennie's attempt to repudiate the divine aspect of the sublime with his own action of puerile creation might seem a futile gesture in the face of the monumental landscape. However, Bennie's action could also be seen as an effort to connect his own nature to the landscape that surrounds him, comparable to the action of gestural painting that Robert Motherwell described as an "effort to wed oneself to the universe"⁴.

For Motherwell the Abstract Expressionist sublime was achieved through the unification of cosmos and self, where “painting becomes sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living”⁵. The heroic action of painting was the ultimate expression of living for the Abstract Expressionists. This sentiment is echoed in Bennie’s video. While the artist cannot compete with the impressive vision of nature that confronts him, in a way his urination is an interchange with the landscape that suggests a unification of artist and the unknown.

In identifying the nuances of the Abstract Expressionist version of the sublime that are present in Bennie’s videos it is possible to see how Bennie extends their enquiry in a contemporary format. The way that Newman and Motherwell engaged with the sublime appears in some ways to be an extension of the cult of personality that underlines much of the Abstract Expressionists work. Alternatively, Bennie’s humble approach exemplifies how the everyday, the mundane and the inconsequential can be just as heroic as the spectacular.

A Wee Sunset
2009
1 min 36 sec
High Definition QuickTime file with sound
Edition of 10

Chris Bennie was born in New Zealand in 1975. He lives in Peregian Beach and lectures in Digital and New Media Art at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He studied at the Otago School of Art in Dunedin, New Zealand and the Queensland College of Art in Brisbane, graduating with a Doctorate of Visual Arts in 2009.

He has held a number of solo exhibitions including *Jordie*, Contemporary Art Center of South Australia, Adelaide (2008), *Our Communication Recorded*, Blindside, Melbourne (2006); *New Video: made in China*, Queensland College of Art Gallery, Brisbane (2006); and *Slower*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2003).

Bennie has also participated in many group exhibitions, including the *Biennale of Sydney: Revolutions – Forms That Turn* (2008); *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane (2008); *New Work 3*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, (2007); and *+Plus Factors*, Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2006).

He has undertaken a number of residency programs, including the Queensland Artworkers Alliance and the State Library of Queensland, Interactive New Media Residency (2007); Transit-Lounge, Berlin (2006); and Shandong College of Art and Design, China (2005).

Bennie initiated and is project director of Brisbane ARI Moreton Street Spare Room (MSSR) and has received support from the Queensland Government and Brisbane City Council.

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¹ Chris Bennie, e-mail conversation, February 5, 2010.

² Crowther, P 1984, ‘Barnett Newman and the Sublime’, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 56.

³ Burke, E 1987, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Boulton, J (ed.), Blackwell, Oxford.

⁴ Levine, E 1971, ‘Abstract Expressionism: The Mystical Experience’, *Art Journal*, Vol.31, No.1 p.23.

⁵ Levine, E op.cit. p.23.

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Installation view *Something or Other*, Old Space 2010. Photograph Sam Scoufios





