SHAUN GLADWELL • April 22 to May 31, 2006

Shaun Gladwell is an accomplished painter, sculptor and video artist whose work encompasses images and ideas that cross cultural and historical boundaries. A Samstag scholar, Gladwell recently completed postgraduate studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London, following three months at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris. In 2003–04, Gladwell’s work featured in several major exhibitions, including 2004: Australian Culture Now, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne; Home Sweet Home: Works from the Peter Fay Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; and Primavera 2003: Exhibition of Young Australian Artists, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. His video works are currently represented in exhibitions in Darwin (24 Hr Art), New Zealand (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery) and (Art in General), New York City and Kunsthaus Baselland, Switzerland.

Shaun Gladwell is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney, www.shermangalleries.com.au

All images and works are courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.
You know that feeling when time stands still? When the universe feels as though it’s falling away the same time it feels like it’s falling deep into itself? When the moment you’re living transforms into an eternal instant? When nothing about actuality actually changes but you’re convinced everything has? When time, moving forward with the same predictable pacing, nonetheless stops in its tracks and blossoms into a suspended, jaw-dropping fullness? When the moment you’re living cuts deep and a sense of presentness is all there is and all there needs to be? When all you can think is, “Wow, yes, more, stay...?”

In the end (and the beginning and the middle), the four videos by Shaun Gladwell that are exhibited in this moment, this instant, are about just that. Kickflipper, Taranaki Descent, Woolloomooloo Night, and Godspeed Verticals (Escalator Sequence) are all situational vignettes in which either skateboarding or breakdancing are the featured actions, but not the ultimate subjects. Pyrotechnical athleticism and a sporty performance—evident in varying degrees in all the subjects—are instead points of departure for the pursuit of a deeper resonance. All four videos are set in public spaces and in the streets, each time using an aesthetic and a narrative that explore the personal, the public and the communal. In Woolloomooloo Night, Gladwell shoots these spaces as though they are an otherworldly realm. In Taranaki Descent, we are never tricked into believing this isn’t an actual gas station, but the cumulative effect of Gladwell’s lone breakdancer—like some shamanistic ritual—transforms the quotidian into a space existing on some other plane.

Why do the teenagers in Taranaki Descent ascend in a mirrored, ethereal elevator before gliding downward in the fading light? Yes, okay, they need to go up before they can physically skateboard down the parking ramp, fair enough, but that’s not it. Why do the breakdancers in Godspeed Verticals need to descend an escalator to begin breaking? We are sliding between worlds here, but it’s not a simple earthly/heavenly paradigm. There is no single maneuver that best suits this slippage. It happens vertically, laterally, and—in Kickflipper—within a single spot. So it is less about traversing distance, less a linear journey, than it is about revelation through ritual.

The physical movements Gladwell is shooting also operate as formal devices within the videos, emphasized through the use of composition and a rigorous (though not onerous) sense of permutation. Nulls of action are located within visuals that are otherwise radically composed. All four videos are set in public spaces and in the streets, each time using an aesthetic and a narrative that explore the personal, the public and the communal. In Woolloomooloo Night, Gladwell shoots these spaces as though they are an otherworldly realm. In Taranaki Descent, we are never tricked into believing this isn’t an actual gas station, but the cumulative effect of Gladwell’s lone breakdancer—like some shamanistic ritual—transforms the quotidian into a space existing on some other plane.

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The physical movements Gladwell is shooting also operate as formal devices within the videos, emphasized through the use of composition and a rigorous (though not onerous) sense of permutation. Nulls of action are located within visuals that are otherwise radically composed. Gladwell elegantly and fluidly divides his picture plane—a terrain of resounding colors and composition—into a theatre both gravity and geometry. The hardcore modernist lines and columns of a subway platform. The deep, darkness and intense florescence of the nighttime gas station. Or concrete, fence, sea beyond, sky above, legs and board frothing in mid air. It’s all ordinary and it’s all gorgeous.

I’ve been watching and thinking about these works for the past year. And they’ve seeped in deeply, in a manner almost haunting. And almost certainly eternal. Gladwell is diving deep into the moment, chasing the sublime within a singular gesture, a repetitive act of beauty winding its way toward a state of grace. “Wow, yes, more, stay...”

John Massier Visual Arts Curator

Kickflipper: within a single spot.
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All four videos are set in public spaces and start from the inside, where skateboards, breakdancers, and performers are in motion, thus exploring the performance and sociocultural idealism of a personal style and its underlying social context. Gladwell’s quote speaks directly to the videos’ very nature: “I’m not interested in making these videos look ‘realistic’. There’s never been one.”

In Woolloomooloo Night, Gladwell shoots these spaces as though they are an otherworldly realm. In Taranki Descent, we are never tricked into believing this isn’t an actual gas station, but the cumulative effect of Gladwell’s lone breakdancer—like some shamanistic ritual—transforms the quotidian into a space existing on some other plane. Why do the teenagers in Taranki Descent ascend in a mirrored, ethereal elevator before gliding downward in the fading light? Yes, okay, they need to go up before they can physically skateboard down the parking ramp, fair enough, but that’s not it. Why do the breakdancers in Godspeed Verticals need to descend an escalator to begin breaking? We are sliding between worlds here, but it’s not a simple earthly/heavenly paradigm. There is no single maneuver that best suits this slippage. It happens vertically, laterally, and—in Kickflipper—within a single spot. So it is less about traversing distance, less a linear journey, than it is about revelation through ritual.

The physical maneuvers Gladwell is shooting also operate as formal devices within the videos, emphasized through the use of composition and a rigorous (though not onerous) sense of composition. Muted colors are located within visuals that are otherwise deeply saturated and intense. The dark, deep, and intense existence of the nighttime gas station. Or concrete, fence, sea beyond, legs and board frothing in mid air. It’s all ordinary and it’s all gorgeous.

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All four videos are set in public spaces and enact a metaphysical discipline which, while undeniably action-packed, glamorous, and sensational, is still an exercise in an ecstacy of perception. A personal aesthetic is realized by the act of extension and compression, Gladwell’s camera manipulations never tricks the audience. Rather, the cumulative effect of Gladwell’s lone breakdancer—like some shamanistic ritual—transforms the quotidian into a space existing on some other plane. Why do the teenagers in Taranaki Descent ascend in a mirrored, ethereal elevator before gliding downward in the fading light? Yes, okay, they need to go up before they can physically skateboard down the parking ramp, fair enough, but that’s not it. Why do the breakdancers in Godspeed Verticals need to descend an escalator to begin breaking? We are sliding between worlds here, but it’s not a simple earthly/heavenly paradigm. There is no single maneuver that best suits this slippage. It happens vertically, laterally, and—in Kickflipper—a single spot.

So it is less about traversing distance, less a linear journey, than it is about revelation through ritual. The physical movements Gladwell is shooting also operate as formal devices within the videos, emphasized through the use of composition and a rigorous (though not onerous) sense of perspective. Hubs of action are located within visuals that are otherwise calmly composed. Gladwell elegantly and fluidly divides his picture plane—a terrain of resounding colors and composition—on a trajectory both painterly and cinematic. The hardcore modernist lines and columns of a subway platform. The deep, darkness and intense florescence of the nighttime gas station. Or concrete, fence, sea beyond, sky above, legs and board frothing in mid air. It’s all ordinary and it’s all gorgeous.

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John Macier
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