

GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Interview with Ed Atkins," *Aesthetica*, January 08, 2012

Aesthetica

Ed Atkins

In Conversation With



Ed Atkins' (b. 1982) work investigates materiality and corporeality by working in high-definition video and writing. Using digital technology and exploring the shifting boundaries between cinema and literature, Atkins uses the camera as a means of contemplating the emotional parodies of life. His forthcoming show at Chisenhale ran from 21 September – 11 November. www.chisenhale.org.uk.

Unlike the majority of video artists, you work primarily with high-definition video. What first attracted you to this media?

The interest in HD is initially one of the preponderance of a technology, then subsequently a critical reflection upon its means and repercussions. HD offers the possibility of a kind of clarity previously impossible in moving image-making. This clarity is most conspicuous in the representation of surfaces; skin, for example, is discernibly haired, pored and blemished. This materiality means that a certain suspension of disbelief is eroded: the balance between characters, the representation of a life on screen and the body of the actor is skewed towards the physical. One is made aware of the material of everything.

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Your show at Chisenhale presents a newly commissioned work and will be your largest solo exhibition to date. Could you talk us through this piece?

It will be a two-channel video work with surround sound, alongside a suite of painted and collaged panels. The work is entitled *Us Dead Talk Love* and begins with the premise of two cadavers in dialogue. They talk about their status ontologically – their lives priorly, their decay, their spirit – all in relation to love and particularly its expression in physical intimacy. There will be a chorus who will interrupt the action with ironies, noises, violence and music. The whole thing, really, is a tragedy of two.

What are the common thematic threads between your works?

Clearly the technological specificity and how to reflect that within the work is an ongoing thing for me. Cadavers are too – unnamed and definite, but absolutely personal. The work I have been exploring recently will continue to show the same “parasitic aspirations” as previous works, in that it will be made physically manifest within the audience – their bodies and brains. Love is the biggest shift – at least in its conspicuousness – from previous work. Love as the original locus of intimacy and emotional excess prior to death’s terrific parody.

The figure of the cadaver often appears in your work as a representation of the physical and corporeal world. How did you become interested in this?

“Sourcing bodies” sounds like grave digging, which is not what I do – figuratively or otherwise. I’m more interested in what it might mean to create a cadaver without killing anyone; without requiring something to die. This comes from an appreciation of the human corpse. There are so many incredibly charged sensitive aspects (smell, weight, memory) that make it unique among objects.

Your work crosses the boundaries between video, sound, drawing and writing. Specifically, what role does writing play?

Writing functions for me in several ways. First and foremost, writing – and in particular reading – is where I find a great deal of my inspiration and interest, and to be more specific through avant-garde literature. In addition to this, I also think best through writing – mostly because it’s immediately reflexive but there is also something expedient about it. My ideas can develop whilst I write them and I can read them almost simultaneously. For me, writing and reading are also similar to video editing in certain ways or, rather, editing in many ways has almost become a form of writing to me. The reactive possibilities of editing on a laptop alongside a word processing program are comparable to those of writing. I would say, however, that reading/writing offers a kind of economy/excess dialectic that video might not. In this way, writing’s relation to representation is utterly removed from moving image’s interaction with sound.

The experience of viewing your work is often described as uncomfortable. How does this sit with you?

Discomfort is something I would probably want for an audience. It’s pretty much what I would desire for myself, though only ever as a pale imitation or precursor to more powerful feelings of revulsion, attraction and guilt. Conversely, the idea of making work that would be described as “comfortable” seems like anathema.

After the show at Chisenhale, what are you working on next?

I’ll be writer in residence at The Whitechapel from September for a year, which I’m very excited about. Among other things, I’d very much like to write a novel. Everyone says that of course, so I’ll also say that I’m working on the culmination of a project for the Tomorrow Never Knows prize with the Film and Video Umbrella and The Jerwood Foundation, and will be screening and talking about a new video made in collaboration with Patrick Ward at the Aesthetica Short Film Festival in November.