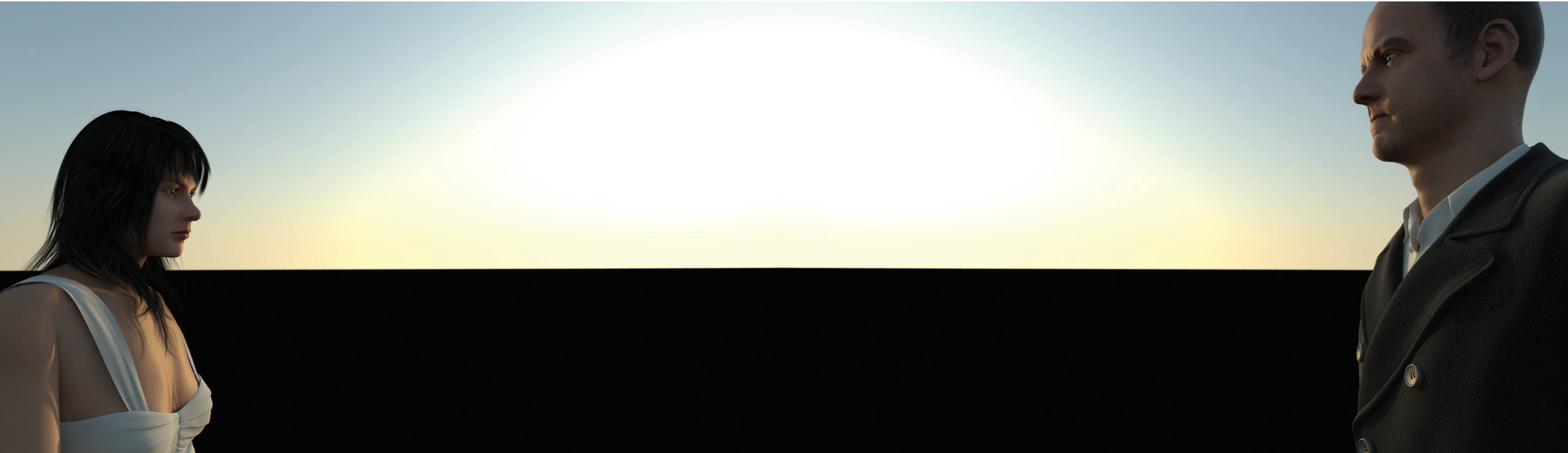


Peter Alwast

Future Perfect



20 August-15 October 2011

Peter Alwast talks to Grant Stevens

I've known Peter Alwast for a little over ten years. When I was an undergraduate at QUT, he graced us with studio visits on his trips home from Parsons in New York, where he was completing his MFA. I liked his work, but, at the time, I don't think I understood why. It was definitely 'about' representation; there was something disconcerting about the way different kinds of imagery collided. Since then, we've become good friends, and we sometimes talk about the relationship between representation and its disruption. When we live in the same city, we like to play tennis. He enjoys cooking, long walks on the beach, surfing, and thinking deeply about art.—Grant Stevens

Grant Stevens: You just had a show at Ryan Renshaw. Is it the same body of work in the IMA show?

Peter Alwast: It's a different body of work, but there are some crossovers with imagery. The Renshaw show was all pictures: hybrids of painting, drawing, photography, and the print, while *Future Perfect* is primarily a video show.

In the first room, the big one, there are nine projections of looped computer animations. Many of these look like representations of gallery spaces containing sculptures, including rotating interpenetrating discs, bouncing coloured coffins, and jostling cardboard cubes (the cubes are blank, then covered in drawings, then covered in photographic imagery). In one video, a man and a woman walk towards one another but never get together.

In the second room, an animated video on a flatscreen suggests an origin story. The subtitles tell how, in Russia, my great-grandfather made a joke about Stalin's child bride that cost him his life. That one isn't a loop; it has a beginning, middle, and end. Lying on the floor, in front of the video, are two slightly crumpled mural prints of photographs of the ocean. There's also a clear Perspex cloud shape on a wall. Viewers will see themselves reflected in it, as if it were a distant hovering mirage.

The first room, where objects are set in perpetual motion, is about departure. The second room registers some sense of arrival.

There are lots of rotating things in the show: spinning disks, revolving texts, and short-looped videos. What is it about rotation, loops, and repetition that interests you?

I have cast perpetually rotating objects and texts into often seamless, endless video loops. There's a sense of time passing (each loop taking a certain amount of time), and yet, in returning to the same moment over and over, they also suggest time suspended.

Temporal paradoxes are also suggested by the title.

The title refers to the way future and perfect tenses are combined when we say something 'will have' happened, as in 'Tomorrow I will have become complete.' The future perfect implies looking back on something that hasn't happened yet; future and past are conflated and the present is somehow deferred. The future perfect combines anticipation and reflection, and it relates to my interest in combining 3-D animation with other mediums like drawing, painting, and shot video. In my work, the virtual and actual coexist in tension, just like experience and expectation in the future perfect.

Your earlier computer-animated videos also tend to resist beginning-middle-end-type narrative structures. *Everything* (2008) did this by presenting views of a 3-D animated scene that appeared to exist in a 'timeless' zone. With *Future Perfect*, did you make a conscious decision to work a different way, by separating the scenarios into different projections?

Yes, I decided to separate out the scenarios as different videos and have them play simultaneously, maybe as an attempt to simplify the layering that was happening in *Everything*. One of the last scenes in *Everything* is a corner of a room where letters and three glass triangles are scattered by a simulated gust of wind. That scene became the starting point for *Future Perfect*. The new work was also a response to the situation I was in, living in Berlin. It was really cold and I didn't go outside often. I was literally staring into a corner of the room for most of the day. I was trying to make something new, but I was bored by most of the ideas I was coming up with. At the time, the idea of an empty corner seemed like a good place to begin. I started to imagine objects and scenes inside this empty space; I began to fill it up with things to pass the time.

I like the idea of you staring into a corner, looking for inspiration. Light hitting the corner of the room is a recurrent motif in the show; it's another kind of repetition. I like the scene where light moves up and down in the corner, never quite committing to being fully bright or dark, day or night.

My interest in the appearance of light hitting the corner of a room partly arose from my everyday experience in Berlin, but also partly from seeing Andy Warhol's *Shadows* (1978) at DIA Beacon in 2006. It's a roomful of screen-printed paintings of two photographs of light-and-dark in a corner in his studio. The same two images are repeated over and over in different colours. The work is static yet cinematic.

***Shadows* is absorbing, even 'meditative'. The paintings surround you as you snuggle into the couches in the centre of the room. But there's something uneasy about it. In that classic Warholian way, *Shadows* gives you little. Its repetition is vacuous.**

Shadows demonstrates a desire to suspend or freeze time using photographic reproduction and repetition. After I saw that work, I thought about this for a long time.

The exterior shots in *Future Perfect* position the light source near the horizon. Why suspend us again in this perpetual twilight zone?

Twilight suggests the transition from day to night or vice versa, however in the videos the light never really changes. We are in transition, without transitioning. *Future Perfect* is simultaneously about desire, a desire to 'arrive' (whether at an ideal location, at a sense of self-mastery, or at a stable meaning), and about never arriving (time suspended or stalled). Or perhaps it is about this in-between zone as the ultimate destination.

In the video about your great-grandfather's joke, what is the imagery?

At first it looks like a distorted, abstracted landscape. Actually, it's a moon rising over an apartment block, as reflected in water. Snowflakes falling into the water cause it to ripple. This romantic imagery directly contrasts with the subtitles, with their tragic tale.

Why do romantic motifs continually crop up in your work?

I am too analytical to give myself over to the expressionist, 'true self' version of romanticism. However, I am drawn to signs of the collective, especially those that try to reconcile the particular with the universal. They could be red, yellow, and blue paintings by Alexander Rodchenko or Barnett Newman, corporate-sponsored parks in Gold Coast suburbs, or even Warhol's great leveler, the Campbell's Soup can. In different ways, they are all utopian. But, of course, with utopian desires come contradictions, as my great-grandfather's story demonstrates. I am interested in how we attempt to resolve contradictions over time to create happy endings, the 'future perfect'. Sometimes these resolutions are desirable, sometimes they are used to control us.

You've mentioned desire, self-mastery, stable meaning. But there's another side—the denials, deferrals, indifference—that's potentially pathological. Maybe there's a fine line between Zen meditation and psychosis.

I have a few books on meditation, but a lot more on psychoanalysis that discuss psychosis. These books are next to each other on my bookshelf, so yes, there, at least, there's a very fine line. Subjectivity is constructed from a variety of sources and influences. I wouldn't claim to make art that articulates all the complexities of subjectivity or of the philosophical language around it. But maybe that's the point: that this word 'subjectivity' is already itself a kind of repetition, one that anticipates some kind of arrival regarding what it could mean. Maybe the word exists, like other words and pictures, to fill up space and time in order to defer psychosis, like someone making the same type of painting every day to make sure they are still complete and alive.

You mix different visual systems. You mix personal anecdotes and family stories with politics, psychoanalysis, and poetry. You mix the flippant with the deeply serious. Do you mind if people get confused by the work? Do you mind if they find it ugly?

'I got real confused and it all got real ugly.' That sounds like something Nicholas Cage would say in a movie before a car accident. Perhaps ugliness and confusion are linked; if you are confused, then things can seem really ugly. I can't second-guess what people will think. Hopefully, there is a formal structure to my work that helps them towards the warm-fuzzy light. I can accept that people can become confounded, but I do care if they get confused or think the work is ugly.

Collage is one of your key strategies.




I tend to take something then add another thing that's related to it in a representational, poetic, or linguistic way, but they don't 'add up'. I'm interested in combining different systems of representation that never ultimately reconcile to create a stitched-up version of reality. I get satisfaction in translating ideas through different media and from the excess and loss that results. I hope that my work isn't chaotic and arbitrary, even though it could be disruptive or even talk about failure.

So, collage *and* translation?

Let me answer that by relaying a formative experience that is a key to my work. When I first went to school in Australia, I didn't understand anything, because it was all in English and my first language was Polish. I still remember not speaking English, a language that is now my primary form of communication. While I am not interested in addressing my biography in my work, I am interested in how that experience could be seen as a starting point for it. I think it left me with a scepticism towards language and its claims to describe 'reality', though I suspect that this is not peculiar to me. I hope *Future Perfect* draws on shared ideas and experiences.

Grant Stevens is an artist based in Brisbane. He lectures in Visual Arts at Queensland University of Technology.

IMAGE Peter Alwast *Future Perfect* 2011, production still COURTESY GALLERY 9, SYDNEY

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