

THE WANDERING ROOM

MELODY

WOODNUTT

*The Last Century Was About History,
The Next Will Be About Belief*



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Pandemonium

Edward Colless

Is this Halloween exhibition of Melody Woodnutt's—accessible not only just over All Hallows Eve and the Day of the Dead, but also coinciding with our transition out of lockdown and into that 'ever after' normalisation of the pandemic—is this a 'trick' or is it a 'treat'? This is not a glib joke, at least not as flippant as it sounds. Take a moment to recall the shadowy but now sterilised lineage of Halloween's 'trick or treat' refrain before its current trivial and middle-class commerce. The genealogy of this pugnaciously unviable option (equivalent to 'your money or your life') includes a ceremonial obligation to beg for food for ancestors and dead loved ones. That's a charming tokenistic gift for innocent shades granted a hall pass from Purgatory, Hades or Limbo; but the 'soul cake' treats would also be given to placate dead enemies and other psychopathic fugitives from hell. Either way, the treat was a device to pacify the hungry ghost; and those hungry ghosts were rampant, unloosed at this time of transition—which, for the European and pagan north, was the swing from summer into winter.

Of course, when the gates between worlds are left unguarded, if just for a short spell, not only can the dead cross the border to visit with the living but so can all those other foreign, fictive and demonic creatures otherwise repressed, exiled or forgotten. This is not a time for mourning or melancholia but of mischief. Nor is it a time of glory or resurrection, but of subterfuge and hazard. Failing to provide a treat for the undead and the unliving at this time of their especially festive uprising was serious enough in its menacing consequences to warrant the punishment signalled by the 'trick': an act of vandalism or home invasion (indexed by the threat and horror connoted in the costume) against the household that holds out from providing an offering, or that tries to hide out. The Halloween masquerade by which 'trick or treaters' feel at liberty to roam the feral night in packs is a macabre comic artifice by which the living disguise themselves as the dead—made up as skeletal, rotting, monstrous—in the hope that they'll not be recognised by the voracious ghosts and fiends let loose, but mistaken to be of their kind or kindred. The Halloween mask is a pact with the heterotopic—and one could also say, heteroptic—commotion outside the economic decorum and moral propriety or sanctity of the household; an inspired perversion of hospitality, of the familial and familiarity. It's a pact with darkness that is ignited by demons.



Film sculpture, 16mm film loop, 16mm projector, goat skull, cabinet, projector stand, haze, 2021

Is there any better way of encountering Woodnutt's installation than by agreeing to this pact? Darkness is the necessary milieu for any projected, analogue film. By a poignant irony, it's only in such a darkness—a mock nightfall zone which Maxim Gorky, after attending one of the earliest public screenings of cinema, famously described as 'the kingdom of shadows'—that the cinema's phantoms are visible. The darkness in most screening venues is an engineered absence or deprivation of light which becomes the background for any cinematic figure offered as a treat. And one could say that the trick of cinema is to make us unaware of this blackout, permitting us to forget that we're immersed in it, to make it a blank darkness. Woodnutt's cinema, however, has increasingly treated this dark ambiance as a substance rather than a shadow zone; and a febrile substance as well, something captured in anachronistic chambers or vitrines in which it coalesces and condenses and detonates, emitting an occult type of radioactivity. When it glowers and incandesces in this fog, her cinematic imagery is less shadowy than it is ectoplasmic: a viscous but abstract energy discharging from the medium's body as a kind of ejaculate at a climax of the séance or trance. This too is a trick, but not as the projection of an image onto a screen. It is more like a psychic projection congealing and then dissipating in a cloud.

There's an avant-garde pedigree of 'expanded cinema' behind this technique, and Woodnutt's movies to an extent resurrect the impulse and stylistics of 20th century d-i-y, independent and 'experimental' filmmaking—notably with the poetic rather than formalist inclusion of exposure flares, granularity and scratches, flicker of double exposures and frame slippage that was often identified with a genre dubbed 'underground cinema'. That was a term meant to invoke a subversive not just alternative art, with the imperative to undermine—by stealth or shock—the conservative habits and norms of perception.

Woodnutt's films however feel less like they burrow through the foundations of art than that they spookily emanate from an 'underworld', the *noir* of which is the tonality not of criminal lore but of fuming, interred spirits: perhaps like the 'upside down' of *Stranger Things*, where a syrupy air seems to snow with black ash. All stories within such an underworld genre have an Orphic arc. They are tales of a descent into a netherworld or a lost world to locate and bring back the object of desire, and Woodnutt's films likewise can plunge into realms of flaming and guttering visual and aural sensations, coaxing crumbling memories or piquant caprices out of the unconscious. Orpheus was the poet who pursued his dead lover, Eurydice, into Hades; and who, by his art, convinced the god of Hades—a god unmoved by any story of human tragedy—to release her. (Although, that story didn't turn out well; and in other versions ... well, dead things don't usually return to the world of the living from the other, or under, side the same as they left, do they?)

But Woodnutt's cinematic poetry has a Promethean edge to it as well. Her projection system looks like equipment devised for a type of weird—and transgressive—science, with the sort of rigging and clatter of a basement contraption for ... for what purpose? Brewing a magic concoction? Bringing the dead back to life? Conjuring the great god Pan? That naked impish figure that glimmers out of the black void, cheekily prancing and erotically prowling about in Pan's mask, might just be the god returning from its archaic oblivion through the projector's smoky beam, like a radio message received from an extra-terrestrial intelligence. As happens in those encounters with alien life in science fiction or sorcery, there's the hazard of invasion or infection alongside the inspiration and the enchantment. In the spirit of Halloween one ought to ask: what if this imp were to escape its bottle, like a genie fleeing from its lamp? Would that be a trick? Or a treat?

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The Wandering Room acknowledges the traditional owners and sovereign custodians of the land on which we operate, the peoples of the Wurundjeri.

We extend our respect to their Ancestors and all First Peoples and Elders past, present and future.