Time Out of Mind

Alison Grant

For the inaugural exhibition in the new Warburton Gallery, Alison Grant has transformed this remarkable Grade One listed building into a space of time. Cascading from the cupola above in the installation *Suspension of Objective Time*, a myriad mysterious objects glisten and glint in mid-air, having from a distance the appearance of alchemical or astrological symbols. Closer inspection reveals these curiously carved wheels and arrows to be the disembowelled workings of antique clocks which have told – and tolled –the times of our lives. Barrels, pinions and watchhands: only the pendulum is missing, and yet, hanging on their slender threads, these workings take on the aspect of a pendulum, of Foucault's pendulum perhaps, swinging still in the Musée das Arts et Métiers, continually reaffirming the rotation of the earth, or the hissing, menacing pendulum of Poe. While undeniably beautiful, the installation nonetheless conveys a sense of unease; time bears down on us, hanging over us like a sword of Damocles, below we stand like Danaë, helpless, as the priapic god descends. We often see time as a threat: time flies from us irretrievably, it hunts us down in its winged chariot, waiting for no man, bearing all its sons away, it is the devourer of all, the destroyer of worlds and will in the end pay us but with age and dust. We are crushed by the weight of the past, while the future, sometimes synonymous with hope, can also appear a trackless, featureless desert – thus Tennyson, '*and ghastly through the drizzling rain on the bald street breaks the blank day*', and the promise of the dawn dies. We jealously guard our store of time in terror of its being stolen away; our earliest means of measuring time, the water-clock or 'clepsydra', conceals in its name the Greek word for thief.

If time is minatory, it is also mysterious and always has been seen as such. For a sense of duration to exist at all the present must somehow contain both future and past - '*the past is never dead*', observed William Faulkner, '*it isn't even past*' - but exactly how remains an intractable problem. As the earth turns on its axis and the stars run in their courses, time describes a vast circle, but how do we square that circle with our own one way ticket through time? Puzzling too is the elasticity of our consciousness of time. It is no surprise that scientific time, founded on the properties of caesium, bears little relation to that we experience, but the same duration may not be felt by me as it is by you, nor by myself in other circumstances. In *The Idiot* Prince Myshkin meets a man who, once condemned to die, had received a last minute reprieve. As he prepared for death, he tells the prince, it '*seemed to him then that he had only five more minutes to live. He told me that those five minutes where like an eternity to him, riches beyond the dreams of avarice; he felt that during those five minutes he would live through so many lives.....that he had plenty of* time'. Dostoevsky, himself once subjected to a mock execution, knew and understood. Thinkers through the ages, from Zeno of Elea to William James and beyond, have struggled with the problem of time, wrestling with its fugitive and evanescent nature, only to find it forever eluding their grasp. Edmund Husserl, having pondered the matter for over two decades, admits that he has no solution and can do no more than '*lift the veil a little from the world of time- consciousness, so rich in mystery*'.

During 2011, at each equinox and solstice, Alison Grant travelled to Loch Fyne where she would paint continually from sunrise to sunset. *Imprints of the Senses*, the works she produced, indelibly marked by the elements with the moment of their making, what Grant calls their '*physical immersion in the now*', are displayed on the first floor of the gallery, the circular space reflecting the circularity that forms one part of our experience of time, time carving a great arc through those equinoctial turning points, as the years wheel through the

seasons until spring becomes spring again, as day alternates with night and the tides (Loch Fyne being a sea Loch) rise and fall. Cyclical time, though, is only part of the story; Grant, painting as the sun rises, already knows that the sun will set and the light fade until it is finally extinguished. God stopped the clock for Joshua, and for Hezekiah turned it back, but not for us. Like Tristram Shandy, we are all born of the clock and marked as such and for us the hands of that clock point only in one direction. In the short film *The Shore of Uncounted Time*, Grant has taken her raw equinoctial paintings and imposed upon them a narrative structure, a beginning and an end, subjected them to the inexorable forward march of linear time. That, too, is part of our experience, and the part, perhaps, that imposes itself upon us most forcefully.

Four Seasons in the Mind, four large works in graphite on paper, recollect and reflect upon those days of intensive, immersive painting. In *Imprints of the Senses* we had strong, vigorous brushstrokes, we had immediacy and freedom; here we have a delicacy that borders on fragility, painstaking detail, an almost obsessive process of working and reworking. Here we have the operation of memory. The Greeks considered Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory, to be the Mother of the Muses; memory is fundamental to time as it is fundamental to being human and all art is in some degree an act of remembrance. Consider such novelists as Joyce and Proust; fiction does indeed seem to be born of an act of memory. One could also argue that the converse is true, that memory itself is an act of fiction. A snatch of music, the glimpse of a landscape, the smell of orange blossom, any sensory 'given' can act as a stimulus, but memory itself is always the result of a process, of working through and working out of dismembering and re-membering. Memory, that which binds all other times together, is always and ineluctably a construct.

In *A Present of Things Past, A Present of Things Present, A Present of Things to Come*, Grant returns to her quest to capture the immediacy of the moment within the ceaseless flow of time. The visual and plastic arts, of course, are

never discursive, rather holding fast to the dictum or battle cry of William Carlos Williams, '*no ideas but in things*'. In seeking an emblem or symbol, an objective correlative, for our experience of time, Grant turns as ever to the natural world, specifically to the seed of the dandelion. Dispersed by the wind, these hang in the air, hang in the present, neither fully alive nor fully dead, born of a past that has gone and pregnant with all possible futures. In creating these works Grant allowed the seeds to fall as they would onto specially prepared plates. For all her subsequent work, with plaster, with egg tempera applied and then scraped back, the marks that remain are the marks made by the seeds at the moment of their fall, unmediated, and captured with a precision that time- bound painting could never attain. Apart from its guarantee of immediacy, this aleatory process also suggests something of the sheer contingency of time looking forward, as against the implacable law of necessity that asserts itself should we ever look back. Bookending these works, gazing back and forth across time, are two portraits of Edmund Husserl, treated photographs that make of the great philosopher of time a spectral figure, an uncertain, ghost-like presence. Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida suggests that in looking at historical photographs our minds propose simultaneously both that 'he is going to die' and that 'he is dead'. The conflation of these two propositions is the collapse of time; viewing these portraits of Husserl, the philosopher defeated by time, induces a sense, in Barthes' words, of '*the vertigo of time defeated*'.

In *And Our Faces Brief as Photos,* Grant gives one final nod to India Buildings and to its previous life as a Registry Office. The work reflects upon the 71,704 births and deaths recorded here during that period, the 71,704 souls whose entry into time, whose exit from time, whose passage through time was marked forever in this very building.

The Shape of Time offers no answers and comes to no conclusions. It does not seek to. What it does offer is a profound mediation on the mystery of time,

impressive in scale, variety and ambition, and expressed through work of restrained and reflective sensuousness, subtle power, and quiet yet expressive beauty. If we must have answers perhaps the best, and certainly the most honest, is that given by Augustine of Hippo: '*What then is time? Provided that no-one asks me I know. If I want to explain it to another, I don't.*'

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