

Outside Time: The Art of Shimon Attie

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...a thing which we have looked at in the past brings back to us, if we see it again, not only the eyes with which we looked at it but all the images with which at the time those eyes were filled.

--Marcel Proust, Time Regained.

Amidst the flux, persisting things are centres of stability.

--Katherine Hawley, How Things Persist.

Shimon Attie's Racing Clocks Run Slow: Archaeology of a Race Track, commissioned on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Bridgehampton Motor Race Track on Long Island, is an homage to a legendary race course. Installed near the site of the course, which has since been transformed into an exclusive country club, it is a powerful testimony to the hold that sport has on the public imagination. The three-screen installation mixes the sounds of racing engines with tableaux that have been created with the participation of people who were part of the track's history. The result is a unique public artwork that speaks to both art history and the history of motor sports around the world.

As a longtime fan of Formula 1 racing, I was immediately drawn to this project. I was not only nostalgic for a great race course, but also interested in how the artist, a newcomer to the sport, would represent this piece of history. Unlike Attie's other work, this installation is not about a catastrophe or loss of home and place. It dwells, instead, on the experience of a particular sport in a particular town. The very modesty of the work's

content suggests the importance of even the most ordinary communal experience and the significance of ritual and sport in our everyday lives.

The distinguishing feature of Attie's art is his engagement with memory and the complex emotions and feelings that are attached to a specific place. The artist earned considerable attention for his evocative staging of slide projections on the walls of buildings in Berlin's Jewish Quarter as part of his 1991-96 series "Sites Unseen." The projections showed Jewish families and individuals who had lived in or near those buildings and who were lost during World War II and the Holocaust. These installations, each of which were on view for a couple of nights, were also photographed, so they existed not only within the time of their presentation in situ but also within the recorded memory of a picture. The movement between past and present--the staging of memories in real time--suffuses "Sites Unseen" and informs all of Attie's subsequent projects.

The installation that most directly anticipates Racing Clocks Run Slow is The Attraction of Onlookers: An Anatomy of a Welsh Village, created in 2006. Attie was invited to make an installation to commemorate the anniversary of a disaster that struck the Welsh village of Aberfan 40 years earlier, when an avalanche buried the town's only elementary school, killing 116 children and 28 adults and devastating the small community. Attie's five-channel installation projects images of people from the community frozen in still poses that reflect their daily lives. They are performing being themselves, in other words, in terms of social and occupational roles. People from all walks of life posed for Attie in ways that reflected their occupations and identities, and they held those poses while on a rotating stage surrounded by a black void. Except for an object or a piece of furniture, they are isolated in an empty space. Each of the five fifteen-

minute loops convey a sense of the individual as a representative of the community and as an embodiment of memory. Drawn from their everyday lives, the poses communicate the ache of loss by reminding us that despite this awful tragedy, the survivors continued on with their lives. The images transcend the past, conveying a living present through these individuals, who represent the iconography of the village. Coloring our reading of these images is our discovery that a large deposit of residue from the local coal-mining industry created the mud slide that caused the avalanche, a tragedy that could have been prevented.

The tension within Attie's remarkable installation is embodied in the powerful use of stillness--his subjects are both still and in motion, holding their static poses while the platform on which they stand revolves. Attie discovered in this work the uncanny power of the non-referential pose, an image shorn of narrative momentum or specific meaning, which allows us to project our own sense of the individuals and the community onto the work.

These works, which engage the memory of communities lost, to the Holocaust or to a cataclysmic disaster, are the precedents for Attie's most challenging and complex installation, Racing Clocks Run Slow. This piece is challenging because the race as an event already has a narrative, and the memories are not defined by trauma but by a less wrenching loss of shared experience. The subject matter is spectator sport and the way a community remembers the circuit and the car races that ran on it. The closing of the course represents a loss of youth, ritual, and the details and the quotidian routines of attending the races.

The poses themselves came out of conversations between Attie and the participants -- drivers, mechanics, announcers, viewers, and townspeople--who adopted poses that reflect how they remember themselves when the racetrack was active. The participants posed with their racing possessions as well as found objects and ruins from the track itself. Attie is not a racing-car enthusiast but he clearly saw in this place and this sport a way to construct a new narrative from the expressions and poses of those who participated in his project. He was inspired by movies on racing, fiction films and documentaries on the sport, and conversations with drivers and local participants in the management and operation of the racing facility. The individual poses represent a place on the course and an activity during the race. They recall in their formal detachment what Joseph Roach has called the “cinematic stop frame,” poses of pre-cinematic stage productions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that were strung together on stage to inform a choreographed narrative. The action shifts across the multiple screens, but continuity is provided by the soundtrack of cars speeding around the track and the unfolding narrative of the race itself. Portions of the soundtrack, which encircles the installation room, were drawn from original recordings made at the track during its heyday, which Attie then altered.

Attie’s aesthetic has been developed through an engagement with art history, and he draws on the formal aesthetics of classical art in his reflections on contemporary life. Racing Clocks Run Slow brings to mind the sculptures of athletes in ancient Greek art as well as the evocation of classical myth in seventeenth-century European painting. Attie evokes the Greek ideal of sport and ritual as the embodiment of physical prowess, evident



in The Charioteer of Delphi (470 BC), the surviving part of a sculpture that consists of a standing body holding the reins of a lost chariot. The physical form itself conveys the power of action and purpose without the chariot or the full narrative of the original sculpture. Though motionless, the statue of the charioteer embodies movement and the power of athleticism as a classical ideal.



The importance of myth and the ideals of classicism are also reflected in such seventeenth-century paintings as Poussin's Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun (1658), which depicts the myth of a giant being guided by a boy on his shoulders across an idealized landscape. Attie, too, explores an ideal of place, which people relate to through the myths and stories they tell. The poses his participants adopt in Racing Clocks Run Slow evoke classical proportion, the balance of form and intent, and the modesty within the grandeur of the human being. Like the charioteer recovered from the ruins of ancient earthquakes, the participants in Racing Clocks Run Slow hold on to the gestures that convey their memories and their relationship to the spectacle of racing.

Attie's installations reference contemporary art as well, in particular the classicism and spirituality in the work of Bill Viola.



The Greeting (1995) was one of Viola's first deliberate engagements with the classical tradition. He has searched, in his work, for ways to convey feeling and emotion through the human body, exploring not only classical European traditions in painting but also Islamic and ancient art history. As part of his commission representing the United States in the Venice Biennial, he discovered Pontormo's painting The Visitation (1528-29) on view in a church in Venice. In a dialogue with that work, Viola created a video in which actors move through a meeting that takes seconds, but which Viola plays out over minutes. Time becomes material, and the movements of the garments, gestures, and facial expressions unfold in slow motion. The actors are performing roles that unfold in the real time of the performance and the slowed time of the installation. Time becomes Viola's medium. In contrast, Attie has subjects performing stillness on an unseen moving stage

while he employs the medium of video to record and frame the simultaneously still and moving images into tableaux that unfold in relation to each other.

Attie's great insight in Racing Clocks Run Slow is to see spectator sport as a locus for memory. Incidental gestures can define, in their mundane quality, the power of the real event, the racing of cars in competition, as the sounds that fill the exhibition space recall the thundering roar that once filled this Long Island countryside. We witness an ennobling of the self as it is re-imagined in the myth of the race, of the athleticism of the drivers, the risks the sport entails, and the care and concern of the spectators and participants. The objects and signposts of the track, a tool, and the dark space surrounding the subjects all evoke a deep dream and the imaginings of the prosaic, which becomes poetic and meaningful in Shimon Attie's powerful installation.