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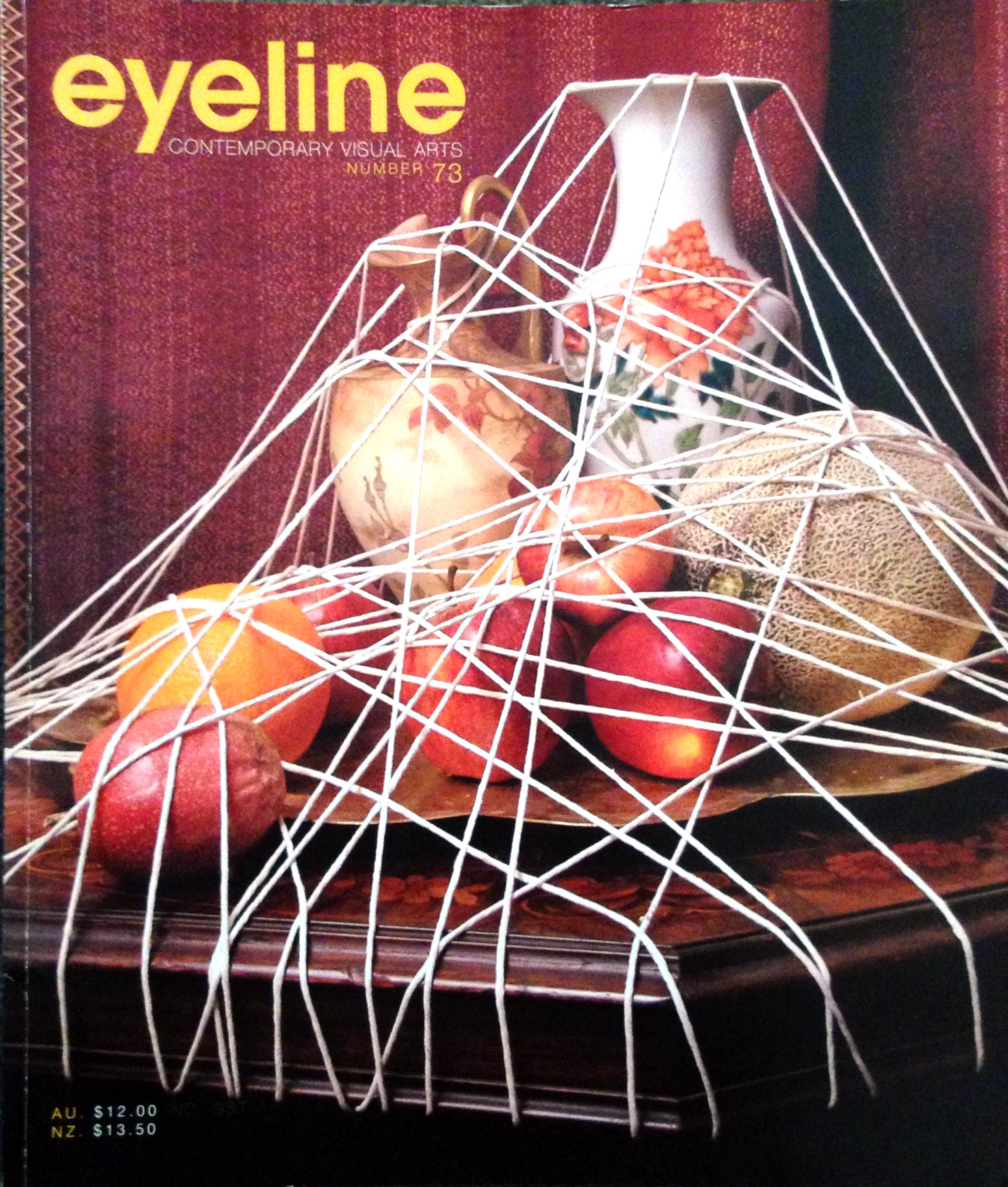

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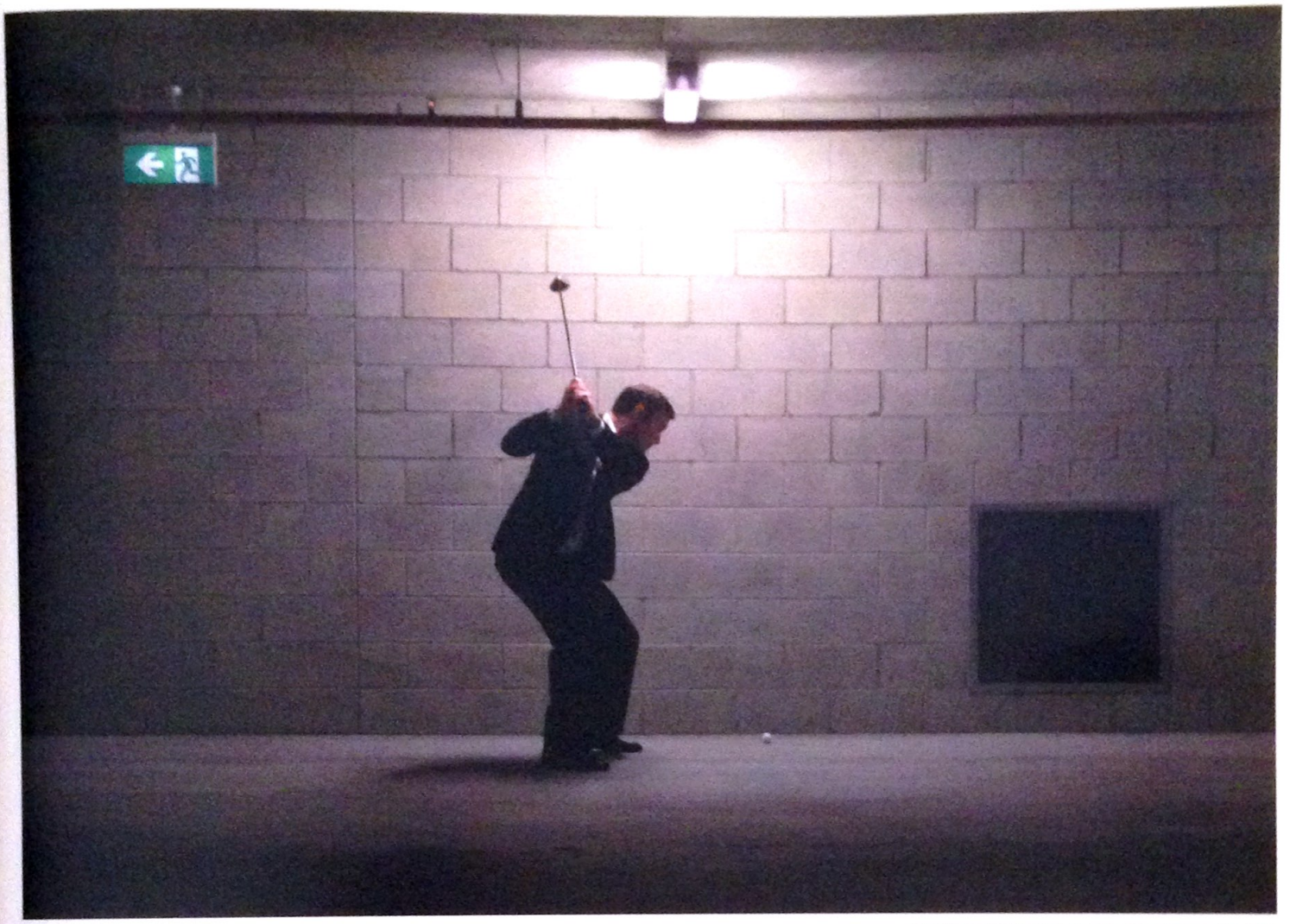


Here We Go, 2009. C-type print, 76 x 61cm. Courtesy the artist.

STAYING MUMME

ADAM GECZY

> The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes
> About life and death and other tuppenny aches
>
> Samuel Beckett after Sébastien Champfort[1]

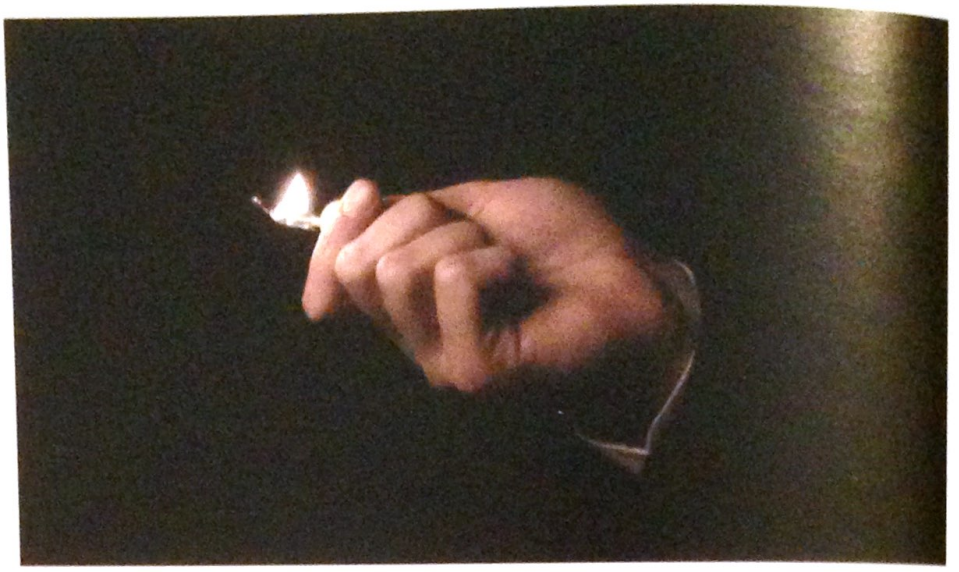
Paul Mumme's performance-based photographic and video works commonly show a figure in a suit, dour and downcast, performing an action that is taken out of the ordinary in order to emphasise its futility, an action such as pulling on a rope affixed firmly to the ground, or attempting to sweep up a rubbish tip. These actions would seem pathological if they were not so patently allegories of the flaws in human hopes and aspirations. Commenting on his own work, Paul Mumme states that his artistic alter-ego is typically 'engaged in some sort of Sisyphean task with Keaton-esque deadpan'. It is a seemingly straightforward set of references but it gives us a great deal to ponder. In the most lucid and influential texts on the matter, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus compares the human lot to that of Sisyphus who was condemned eternally to haul a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again. Paul Mumme's work plays out a silent and mute world in which every game is an endgame.

The short video loop *Earth Mover* (2006) is one of the most visually concise renditions of the Sisyphean predicament that one will find. The artist, back bowed, legs tensed, features himself tugging at a rope that is firmly lodged within the soil. The suitedness of the figure is important, for it allows the artist to sidestep connotations of his individual agency toward a generic persona that becomes a nameless avatar for one and all. But always comedic

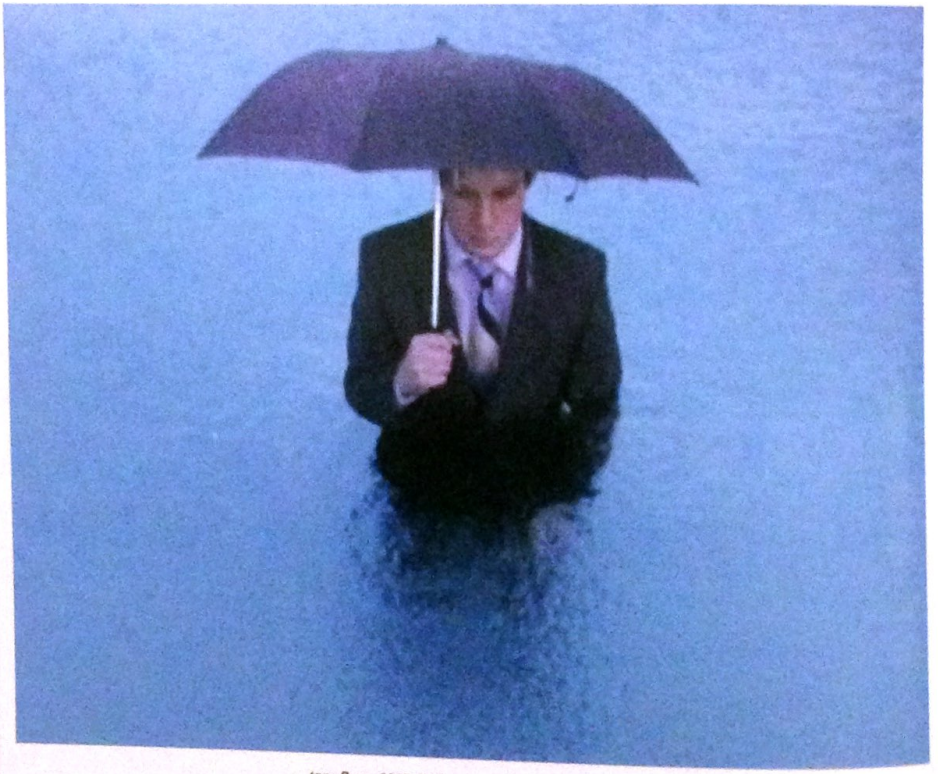
like Charlie Chaplain with his black suit and cane, or Buster Keaton in his porkpie hat, the figure discloses to us a stupidity that we shun, yet at the same time a condition that is inescapable. Keaton, to whom the artist explicitly refers, was known for his comic deadpan, a blank stoic expression that earned him the title 'The Great Stone Face'. It only served to amplify him as the detached individual who must bear the brunt of life's iniquities, the eternal whipping horse, the hapless undeserving victim. Mumme's own version is still very much in this mode, using the video medium with its licence to suspend narrative to remain silent, and as with works like *Earth Mover*, close to motionless.

Writing in the shadow of the Second World War, Camus asks what he deems to be the ur-question of the human predicament: what is human purpose when all we have is a promise and when circumstances have given us only cataclysm? What is the nature of our agency when measured up against the delusions of destiny? Camus's treatise is in many ways a confrontation with the existential abyss opened up by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a gulf widened significantly by the social alienation wrought by industrialisation, widespread secularism and the mass catastrophes of two world wars. Kierkegaard dissected the logical premises of religion to find that there was little else to guide him but faith. It is this faith, itself defined by a conviction defiant of any empirical proof or verifiable logic, that Camus describes as pre-eminently absurd. There are roughly two kinds of absurd ways of being according to Camus. The first pertains to all of us, the second to art. It is a central tenet of existence that we persist in the face of an absent, faceless and unverifiable hope (Spinoza, interestingly enough, called hope a 'sad passion'). Belief is an active component of sanity; we get dressed, wash, brush our teeth, act responsibly, obey the rules, all because they safeguard a particular state of being that is, in truth, promised us, but never adequately given (although the opposite, a world of plenitude is more abject and can be interpreted as obsessive psychosis). This for Camus is the essential condition of human existence, to persist in a state of absurdity, without beginning or end, condemned to what Hegel a century and a half earlier called the 'ineluctability of the travail'. We travel up and down a slope, like Sisyphus, hauling or being pursued by a boulder without so much as a notion as to why we are making the effort that we are.

When it comes to art, Camus suggests that the most representative absurdist forms are those that have no sense of relief from the state of futility into which we are cast. Key authors for Camus were Franz Kafka, Anton Chekhov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky whose worlds are wrought by impasses, although Camus takes exception to the parts of their *oeuvres* that show elements of the false promise of hope. If hope is vain, there still exists a worthwhile course of action which Camus calls revolt. One may submit to the absurdity of life, which is to a degree acceptable, or one can meet it with resistance, with scorn: asks, 'What to me signifies signification beyond my condition?' in other words, our ways and means of understanding are all caught up in our absurd plight.[3] How can we reach for certainty when the tools that have be given to us have no certainty to them anyway? Camus' treatise is one that stares



... FOR MUMME THE SPACE OF 'DEAD-ENDEDNESS', IF IT CAN BE CALLED THAT, IS ONE OF CURIOUS EXPRESSIVE POSSIBILITY.



top: ***Burn*****, 2006**. DVD, Loop. *bottom:* ***Man with Umbrella*****, 2005**. DVD, Loop. Courtesy the artist.

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clockwise from top left: ***Flying Machine*****, 2006**. DVD, Loop; ***Earth Mover*****, 2006**. DVD, Loop. ***A Lot*****, 2009**. C-type print, 76 x 61cm. Courtesy the artist.

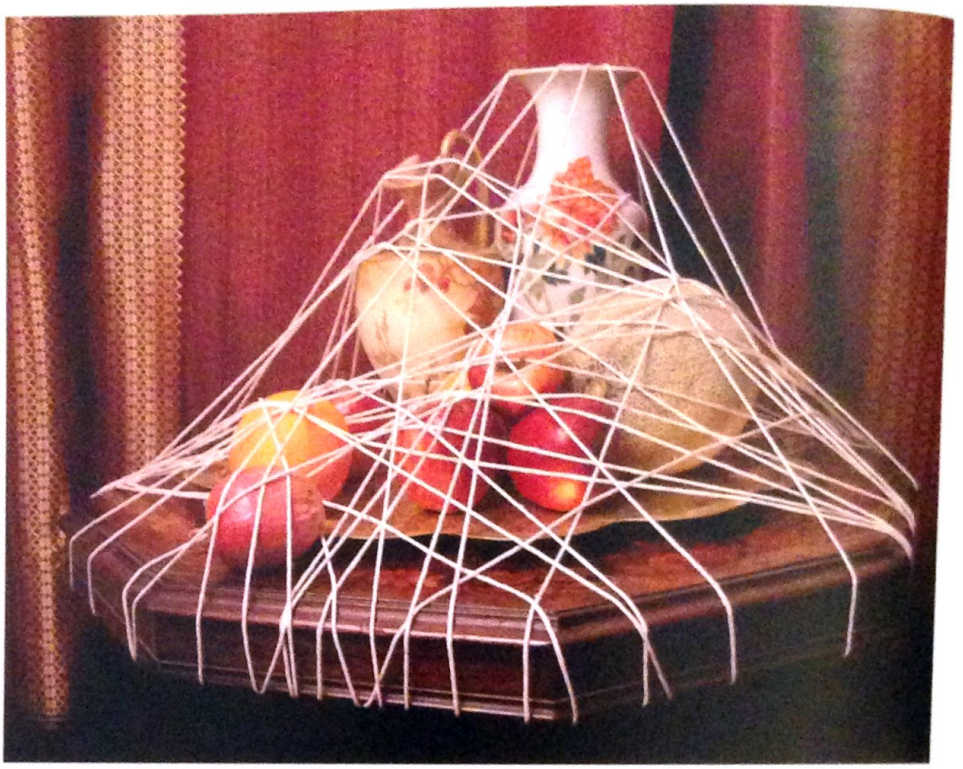
nihilism in the face and it is a call to do so; the spirit's liberation comes in accepting its limitation and its imminent end.[4] The triumph comes not in stagnation but in creative diversity where recognition of absurdity authorises us to 'plunge' into states of excess.[5]

The excess that Paul Mumme's work espouses is the very excess of limitation, in which the finitude or redundancy of things is announced doubly, or trebly, or *ad infinitum*. An orthodox idea of the artist is someone who reveals a truth to life and circumstance that is not readily available to us. Well and good—Mumme's worldview speaks of the internal imminence within all things. Each object or action must be understood as having its own evolution, or unfolding, that leads ultimately to an end. Yet Mumme's work is not obsessed with eschatology in any pessimistic sense, nor can his nihilism be said to be self-defeating.

Rather, for Mumme the space of 'dead-endedness', if it can be called that, is one of curious expressive possibility. A photograph from 2007 depicts a traditional still-life arrangement—vases, fruit on a platter—lashed to the table with obsessive meticulousness. In the same series, a divan is tied to the floor, while the pictures at the back of the room have been taped to the wall with such overkill that the images inside have been obscured. These domestic objects have been consigned to their own material oblivion, rendered even more inert than before, and useless. There is a special air of intent to these photographs; one has the sense that the divan with its faux ormolu and its pale puce upholstery has not been arbitrarily chosen, for it is the artist's family home. These temporary transgressions are like those of the dreamy youth who resorts to his own futile gestures to comment on what he perceives is the futility of his own parents' lives. Understood on another level, such acts and images can be thought of as experiments in emptying things of meaning. This is Mumme's encounterless encounter: tying down things that are already immobile, like gagging things that are already mute.

The trope of being tied down has a distinguished lineage in Mumme's work, beginning with *Flying Machine* (2006) where the artist (again suited) crouches uncomfortably in a play helicopter in a public park; the helicopter is of course bolted to the ground and has a handful of helium balloons affixed to it. To break the monotony, and to remind us that the video is running, the figure pokes his head out to see if the balloons are still there and to five them a tacit heave-ho. Then there is the 2010 photograph of a kitsch figurine of an eagle with one wing taped with a flaccid balloon. On the other side, in the direction where the head is craned, another balloon has been let fall. In another work, a paper aeroplane has been tied to a brick with the same overstated randomness. It would perhaps be inaccurate to relate these images to Surrealism, because at least Surrealism under the a paranoid leadership of André Breton thought of itself as a revolution, a liberation of the unconscious that would then reframe perceptions, morals and mores. There is no such call to strength here, only a psychological dismemberment. We can hear the voice of *Mad* magazine's Alfred E. Neuman somewhere in the wings: 'What me worry?'. It is the gay levity of the apathy born of insignificance.

Mumme thus creates dilemmas from nothing for which there is neither rationale nor solution. In *Here we Go* (2009), the artist places himself playing golf in front of a wall; in *Man with Umbrella* (2005—one of the artist's more sober titles), a figure filmed diagonally from on high stands in a pool holding an umbrella against the falling rain; in *Spearfishing* (2008) the artist has himself doing the eponymous task in a city lagoon, surrounded by the urban highrise and lights. There is something to be said for seeking out tasks that most vividly embody a state of wanton aimlessness. It is important to remember that these are exaggerated problems that are self-imposed and that raise unanswerable questions about all forms of voluntary undertakings. In this respect they are reflections not only of the absurdity of the existential quandary, but on art itself. For unlike farming which provides people with food, or unlike medicine that keeps people healthy, or education which inculcates skills and knowledge, art's place is traditionally contested, its usefulness in doubt, its relevance attacked. Indeed, once an artist comes of a certain age and sees many of his peers in more secure positions, living out their lives with



top: ***Still Life***, **2007**. Giclee print, 76 x 61cm. *bottom:* ***Lounge***, **2007**. Giclee print, 76 x 61cm. Courtesy the artist

top: ***I'm Good You're Completely Stuffed*****, 2010**. Inkjet print, 25 x 36cm. *bottom:* ***Holy Crap*****, 2010**. Inkjet print, 45 x 36cm. Courtesy the artist.

complacent certainty, he is apt to ask why he does what he does. One of the reasons that art is the best way, according to Camus, of exercising revolt is because to practice art is to embroil oneself within 'excess' from the very beginning. Art above all else is the epitome of the Sisyphean task of doing something ostensibly useless that garners mixed approval and which the artist is regularly called upon to justify. For to be an artist is be brought close to the Sisyphean question as to whether the endless mission of art has been either chosen or imposed. One could always stop hauling the boulder up the hill—but what else is there to do? (Study law?)

There are many kinds of work that cry earnestly to meet this call for justification. It may be social embroilment or an art that all too obviously penetrates a politically correct cause. Not all of this kind of work is wrong or bad, but it is worth recalling Theodor Adorno's complaint against Sartre's line about politically committed art, namely that such art elides art's tantalising ambiguity, its impenetrable magic, or madness, for the sake of work that is easily legible according to anecdotes of the contemporary moment. Mumme's work is not of a piece with Adorno's wishes, either, because it purposely flies in the face of aesthetic loftiness (take for example *Spear*, 2008, a plastic knife attached to a broom shaft), but what his work does offer is a highly intense focus on art's own uselessness and inscrutability, seen from the angle of both artist and creator. Art does however have the last laugh, since it is communicated within the closed loop of aesthetic form.

At their best, Mumme's dramatic capsules are extraordinarily contained and complete. An earlier work, *Burn* (2006) is a short video of a hand holding a burning flame that loops before it has a chance to burn the fingers. This small work even more than others is a vivid metaphor of the Nietzschean 'Eternal Return'. In *The Gay Science*, the same book in which this concept is first mentioned, under the heading 'What is Life?', Nietzsche states: 'Life—that means always fending off what wants to die'.[6] Mumme's works may be parables to the pointlessness of the living, but in their enclosure and their silence, they live on—interminably, joyfully. ■

notes

1. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems 1930-1978*, John Calder, London, 1984, p.157.
2. Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, Gallimard, Paris, 1942, p.80.
3. Camus, ibid., p.76.
4. Camus, ibid., p.157.
5. Camus, ibid., p.158.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1886), *Werke in Vier Bänden*, Verlag das Bergland Buch, 1985, Münich, 4:28.

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