

Only the Dream is Real, 2011, reclaimed timber, cast iron, 42 x 73 x 17cm
All images this article of work by Peter Tilley; images courtesy the artist and Brenda May Gallery, Sydney



Peter Tilley and the Garden of Death

HELEN HOPCROFT

An egg carved from a horse's thighbone. An old-fashioned glass vial dusty with powdered bone. Tiny bird wing bones arranged in a careful spiral. Memories of a lost figure blasted against a wall like a nuclear shadow. A small table piled with neat pyramids of pomegranates, offerings to unknown gods or lost friends. A solitary rowing boat, without oars or sailor, drifting on a featureless sea at the end of the world. The imagery of Australian sculptor Peter Tilley hovers continuously between life and death, hope and fury, despair and atonement. Like an eternal Day of Judgement, each sculpture seems to repeatedly plead for answers: Am I worthy? What happens when I die? Will you keep your side of the bargain? What can I do to protect myself?

Since the early 1980s, a fascination with the funerary rites and burial art of Ancient Egypt has sustained Tilley's creativity. After leaving art school Tilley, like many young artists, found himself searching for an authentic direction for his practice: some true, lasting and reliable indicator of the self. An avid reader, he stumbled across a copy of A. J. Spencer's *Death in Ancient Egypt* in the process discovering an enduring portal that would fire his creative intelligence and visual imagination. 'It was just one of the books I was reading at the time', recalls Tilley, in his carefully measured voice, rather quiet and dry. 'I found it fascinating and I've been working with that idea ever since. I don't know how many times I've read it; it's now a pile of leaves.'¹

In a late 2010 exhibition at the Brenda May Gallery in Sydney, *something other than itself*, Tilley filled the gallery with sculptures that although pervaded with a sense of death, still manage to be delicate, humorous, sweetly pretty and joyous. In homage to the Egyptian practice of burying objects to sustain the deceased in the afterlife, the exhibition included numerous small offerings: a still life on a table, a groove precisely etched around its circumference, the placement creating an almost animated conversation between the objects on the table. According to historians, Egyptian priests poured water over models of food, magically transforming them into real objects, while the

water ran away to pool in the groove. On another small black offering table, a poised stack of pomegranates, considered a holy fruit in the court of the Pharaohs. Tiny bird bones arranged in a small spiral, seemingly too small to remain standing vertical, encased in a black box and placed on a wall. In a corner a standing life-size figure, carved wood and painted black, clutching a sharply defined lily in one mannish hand, the petals curved like a blade. The figure hovers between the genders, possessing the hips of a woman but no breasts or genitals, frozen in mid-stride, one foot firmly placed in front of the other, a precise echo of thousands of years of Egyptian figurative tradition.

When questioned about the asexuality of this particular sculpture, Tilley replied that his intention was not to depict an actual hermaphrodite, but to avoid an autobiographical reading through the creation of a universal figure. The ambiguous modelling allows viewers to identify with the piece, regardless of their own sex. Describing these figures as 'caught somewhere in the middle, neither male or female',² Tilley's strategy leads the viewer on a beguiling slide between the genders, an ambivalent, vaguely erotic response to the figures, their sexuality and identity experienced as both known and elusive. The inclusion of the lily, a pale flower traditionally associated with mourning and death, triggers a childhood memory of his grandmother's warnings about poisonous calla lilies in her garden: 'If she said it once, she said it a thousand times.'³

A number of pieces contain a single figure, often depicted on the verge of some decision, some difficult choice. Frequently these decisions appear pedestrian, offering the sculpted figure deceptively simple options: to enter a doorway, or remain outside; to sit on a chair or remain standing; to wait or leave; to climb a ladder or stay close to the ground. Yet underlying this apparent simplicity is a continual quiet recognition that all action has consequence, whether perceived by the actor or not, and this consequence will have to be reckoned with eventually: you cannot escape your acts anymore than you can escape your shadow, memories or mortality. In this delicate way, Tilley reminds the viewer that a human life



Between Extremes, 2009, coal, ceramic, lead, timber, 23 x 23 x 4.5cm



Installation view, *Something Other Than Itself*, Brenda May Gallery, Sydney 2010



Seize the Day, 2008, patinated cast bronze, stainless steel wire, unique state, 35 x 33.5 x 15.5cm



Darkness Outside, 2009, lead, timber, 28.5 x 27 x 11cm

is made of a thousand such decisions, that each action has an ethical shadow.

One wall-mounted piece reveals a domestic space, with a suitcase left at the base of a carved staircase. No figures are visible; it's a self-contained, mysterious narrative that invites speculation. Is the owner of the suitcase leaving or arriving? Has he or she vanished back upstairs for one final kiss, or to hurl one last frantic insult? Perhaps there is someone else in the house? In other works, two figures are frozen in a tableau, the interaction between them clearly humorous, even affectionate. A moment of quiet whimsy when a cat and a man, together in a room, both stand looking at a comfortable chair, deciding who should sit, a kind of high noon stand-off between human and feline.

In Tilley's practice a recurring motif is the pairing of a human with a dog or cat, the non-human animal fluctuating between the roles of friend, deity, avatar, or spirit guide. The frequent inclusion of the cat figure echoes the privileged position cats held in Egyptian society.⁴ Tilley's frequent pairing of a human, on the point of a decision, with an impassive feline implies the cat possesses an understanding the human lacks. In art as in life, the elongated ears of his feline figures owe as much to the sacred sculptures of the Goddess Bastet as they do to the artist's beloved Siamese cats. 'There is much about the feline that I admire, and their depiction in my sculpture is

mostly in that vein: as a graceful, loyal companion or perhaps an entity of greater wisdom and insight.'⁵

On other occasions, the presence of a human figure is merely implied by a shadow or a few small belongings. In a piece titled *The first steps*, a pair of gentlemen's shoes cast in lead sit atop a battered chestnut leather suitcase, a disparate pairing of object and media that communicates both the humour and pathos envisaged by such a journey, the dark side of any determination to act: 'I want to change, but ...' In many pieces, a flattened piece of lead sheeting forms the outline of a human figure, the person who cast the shadow unseen. The shadow, resembling the blast outline after an explosive device, expresses the memory of a person rather than their existence; the shape occasionally possesses the rounded contours of a sarcophagus. In Egyptian art, writes Tilley, 'the shadow did not form part of the principle of representing figures or objects and was not included in paintings or reliefs; rather, it was considered an essential element of a person along with their body and soul.'⁶ He quotes from Victor I. Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow*: 'The shadow was how the Egyptians first visualized the soul.'⁷ In Tilley's work the shadow motif shifts between menace and promise, a portent of an epiphanous moment, or a vital understanding that remains elusive and out of reach. It is interesting to speculate whether the shadow functions as a visual signifier for ethical conduct, an intangible record of

behaviour, a presence that clings inseparably to the human actor throughout their life.

Tilley embraces the idea that his work remains open to a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. 'Duality of meaning', he writes, 'is an aspect that I have consistently pursued and consciously incorporated in my work'. Although the work is richly symbolic, he prefers for the apparent simplicity of the objects to be capable of multiple or contradictory interpretations. 'To attempt to make sense of the language of the work is part of the viewer's input, and in effect can be viewed as instrumental in completing the cycle of the work.'⁸ Tilley prefers his works to retain their quiet mystery; he is not averse to planting the occasional red herring, allowing the objects to keep their dignity and the artist his privacy. Yet while he remains intrigued by the symbols and motifs of Egyptian funerary culture, frequently incorporating them into his visual language, Ancient Egypt represents a starting point for his creativity, not an end in itself. His work is seeded with memories, references to his hometown of Newcastle, images of the local landscape (bones cut to resemble the sand dunes at nearby Stockton beach), narratives twisting in and out of personal history and political concerns. Earlier work critiqued the international proliferation of nuclear weapons, while recent sculptures carry oblique references to sustainability and environmental degradation.

Before training as an artist, Tilley served an apprenticeship as an airframe fitter with the Royal Australian Air Force. While this experience is generally assumed to be the basis of his work's precise craftsmanship, he said that it is more likely to have originated while watching his father make things for their house. 'He had a shed in the backyard and he made most of our furniture, light fittings; he was very clever. I picked up his values mostly by watching him.'⁹ Tilley sometimes chooses materials purely to offset his tendency towards perfectionism. He began using lead because 'the patina of lead is something that you have no control over', and because he liked the metal's strange spatial ambivalence: 'the quality of the surface, you can't really determine where it is.'¹⁰ Lead brings with it its own potent range of references: funerary apparatus, radiation shield, alchemist's metal, a remnant of heavy industry and the port city of Newcastle's industrial past.

While an intricate visual language necessitates precisely chosen materials, the sculptor prefers to work with objects that have evolved their own symbolic

resonance. Tilley tells a story about visiting an old graveyard at Sandgate, near Newcastle, on the day that workers were clearing up an overgrown section of the cemetery. In the pile of weeds and debris waiting to be taken to the local rubbish dump, Tilley found Victorian-era ceramic angels, doves, flowers, wreaths and anchors, small objects that were later incorporated into sculptures. On another occasion, during a walk along Stockton Beach, he discovered a mass graveyard of migratory birds, mounds of sooty shearwaters dead from hunger and fatigue during their annual pilgrimage. Tilley collected thousands of wing bones, the endless finality of bone forming another crucial element of his visual language: a type of winged *vanitas*, the hair-thin fragility of the bones communicating impermanence, vulnerability and loss.

Tilley's practice can be read as a plea for ethical conduct, a critique of consumerism, which uses the apparatus of death to remind us that what we do now matters. This theme, perhaps more than any other, gives his work contemporary relevance, transforming it into something other than itself.

1. Interview with Peter Tilley, 2009.
2. Interview with Peter Tilley, 2009.
3. Interview with Peter Tilley, 2009.
4. Cats formed an important part of Egyptian mythology; they were mummified as tomb offerings, while feline cemeteries have been discovered across Egypt.
5. Peter Tilley, *Something other than itself*, unpublished Masters paper, The University of Newcastle 2009, p. 41.
6. Tilley, 2009: p. 30.
7. Tilley, 2009: p. 31.
8. Tilley, 2009: p. 73.
9. Interview with Peter Tilley, 2009.
10. Interview with Peter Tilley, 2009.

Peter Tilley's latest solo exhibition *On the Nature of Things*, shows at Brenda May Gallery, Sydney, 23 October to 10 November 2012. brendamaygallery.com.au

Helen Hopcroft is a Newcastle-based artist, writer and curator. She lectures in Creative Arts at the University of Newcastle. Her recent solo exhibition, *Strange Tales*, showed at Despard Gallery, Hobart, 10 to 29 May 2012; and she recently co-curated (with Jo Brooker) the touring exhibition *Happily Ever After*, a group show on the theme of artist's books.

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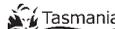
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