

SHAUN GLADWELL MATRIX 162

JUNE 2 - SEPTEMBER 18, 2011

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART



ON GRAVITY AND LEVITY

The body is subject to the forces of gravity. But the soul is ruled by levity, pure.

—SAUL BELLOW¹

Ominous and dreamlike, a black car silently crawls along a red dirt road that bisects the wide open plain of a scrubby desert landscape. A vast blue sky completes the symmetrical composition. The vehicle, viewed from behind at a constant distance, raises dust from its tires in slow motion as the car drives endlessly, but goes nowhere. From a car window, an anonymous dark-helmeted figure emerges. The form, clad in black leather, methodically climbs atop the roof of the moving car and stands, back to the viewer, in quiet reverence to the infinite grandeur of nature. So begins Shaun Gladwell's entrancing video work titled *Interceptor Surf Sequence* (2009).

Interceptor Surf Sequence embodies many of the elements that reside in Gladwell's art—extreme sports, popular culture, art history and his native Australia. Car surfing²—the act of standing on a car's hood, trunk or roof while the car is moving—is a dangerous stunt engaged primarily by foolish teenagers with often fatal results. In the video, the artist is the performer, as he is in many of the works. Gladwell explains his longstanding connection to physical activity, “My life was consumed by urban sports and their scenes (or subcultures, if I can still use that term) until it became my ‘subject matter’ in art school. A critical shift for me was exploring different ways of representing these activities.”³ Shown in dreamlike slow motion, *Interceptor Surf Sequence* is a study of the body in space that can be closely related to popular culture and art history.

Although universally recognized, the *Mad Max* film trilogy created an especially strong mythology for young men in Australia, where the films were made. Starring Mel Gibson as the iconic hero in the title role, George Miller's future dystopian action films⁴ also featured Max's black V8 Ford Interceptor and the post-apocalyptic Australian wasteland as two additional characters in the narrative. Gladwell's *Interceptor Surf Sequence*, part of his “MADDESTMAXIMVS” project, employs all three film characters—the ultimate muscle car, the fearsome landscape, and the avenger/outlaw in black leather. To Australians, the figure of Mad Max also suggests the Australian folk hero/bushranger⁵ Ned Kelly (1854/55–1880), whose American counterpart and contemporary would have been Jesse James (1847–1882), a legendary figure and criminal of the Wild West. However, in stark contrast to the violent action of Miller's film and Kelly's crime sprees, Gladwell's lone, dark figure—as threatening as he looks—only engages in slow consideration of the stark natural beauty around him, before climbing back into the moving car.⁶

Man's thoughtful contemplation of nature's splendor holds a recurring role in the history of art, particularly in the work of nineteenth-century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), whom Gladwell acknowledges as a reference.

SHAUN GLADWELL, *INTERCEPTOR SURF SEQUENCE*, 2009.

PRODUCTION STILL. PHOTO: JOSH RAYMOND.

© SHAUN GLADWELL. COURTESY THE ARTIST &

ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA



Variations on the “man in nature” theme are ever-present throughout Friedrich’s oeuvre, with the strongest comparison to Gladwell’s composition in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818). Friedrich’s dark-cloaked central figure, his back to the viewer, stands upon a rocky mountaintop, overlooking a dramatic landscape and sky. Like Friedrich, Gladwell shows man’s solitary encounter with the enormity of nature, provoking a spiritual experience. German Romanticism also anticipated the American paintings of the Hudson River School, a signature collection at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Prominent works by Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church and Thomas Cole provide an American counterpoint to Gladwell’s meditation on the Australian landscape. But Australia has its own version of this landscape painting tradition. In 1998 and 1999, the Wadsworth Atheneum partnered with the National Gallery of Australia to present the two bodies of work in the four-venue traveling exhibition *New Worlds from Old: 19th-Century Australian and American Landscapes*.

Gladwell’s vast natural landscape—the outback—is highly specific to Australia. Approximately 90 percent of the Australian population lives within seventy-five miles of a coast, which suggest the hinterlands are undesirable for human living. Home to numerous animal species—including the dingo, emu and kangaroo—the inland area, its

SHAUN GLADWELL, *INTERCEPTOR SURF SEQUENCE*, 2009.

PRODUCTION STILL. PHOTO: JOSH RAYMOND.

© SHAUN GLADWELL. COURTESY THE ARTIST &

ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA



highways, and wildlife become the stage for *Apologies 1 – 6* (2007-09), a second work from the “MADDESTMAXIMVS” series. The anonymous figure now rides a dark motorcycle across the desert highways, pulling over to the shoulder of the road at six different sites of kangaroo roadkill, suggesting its pervasiveness, as eighteen-wheelers speed past. Performing the same measured ritual each time, the man in black waves flies away from the still carcass, then gently lifts the body into a motherly hold and stands. As the figure carries the kangaroo out of camera range, presumably to give it a proper burial, he seems to whisper an apology to the innocent creature.

These gestures of compassion and grief in *Apologies* have art historical links to Renaissance paintings of the *pietà*⁷—a depiction of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus in her arms. The analogy resonated strongly in Venice, where *Apologies* was presented in Gladwell’s presentation in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. There is also a contemporary association with seminal German artist Joseph Beuys’ *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), a shamanistic performance in which the artist cradled a dead hare in his arms for three hours whilst walking and whispering inaudible explanations to the animal. While the Beuys performance is symbolic, Gladwell’s performance in *Apologies* is decidedly literal.

Gladwell's *Apologies* refers most strongly to contemporary Australian issues—the destruction and deforestation of the land in the name of progress. Even more, through interaction with the kangaroo, Gladwell symbolically apologizes to the indigenous peoples of Australia who were mistreated under colonization. From the late nineteenth century to the early 1970s, the “Stolen Generation” or “Stolen Children” were forcibly removed from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families to be raised by people from government agencies and church missions. An official apology was given by the government in 2008.⁸ Such injustices find an American counterpart in long-term mistreatment of its own Native American populations.

For all the similarities between Australian and American history, certain popular cultural phenomena strike more universal chords through the physical activities of youth in urban and coastal settings. Skateboarding, surfing, breakdancing, and BMX bike tricks interest young participants virtually everywhere. And world traveler Gladwell creates his videos of these subjects all over the globe, from Sydney and Yokohama, to Toronto, New York, and Tarin Kowt (Afghanistan), where the artist was stationed as Australia's official war artist in October of 2009. In his MATRIX exhibition, Gladwell includes *Figure/Firearm Study (Colt M4)* (2010), a video still/photograph from the video *Double Balancing Act* (2010). The image depicts an Australian soldier in the desert landscape performing a balancing act with his rifle, subverting its intended use, a typical trope of the artist. The soldier balances the large rifle by its muzzle in the palm of his bare hand. Gladwell notes that the weapon is a Colt M4; its inclusion in the show is an intentional nod to the Wadsworth Atheneum's Colt firearms collection.

Like the still image of the soldier's stunt, each Gladwell video features a single-person performance in a clearly framed space. The figure is in perpetual motion—spinning, twisting, turning, or riding—defying gravity, maximizing velocity, and often being suspended in never-ending rhythmic slow motion. The artist offers these mesmerizing physical performances for consideration as the body in art, the figure in the landscape, and creates dynamic variations of conventional portraiture and the landscape tradition.⁹ *Yokohama Linework* serves as an example.

In *Yokohama Linework* (2005), the urban landscape is literally under the wheels of the artist's skateboard as he rides a path of various painted lines through the streets of Yokohama, Japan. The camera, pointed downward to the street for the endless ride, records the image of the artist's sneaker (a self-portrait) and the front end of the skateboard on the street (the landscape), as well as the sounds elicited by the changing textures of the urban surface. A metaphorical exercise in drawing, Gladwell determines or “draws” his line through the city as much as he follows the lines. Lines traditionally bisect streets to separate lanes of traffic, but Gladwell also sees the lines of his *Lineworks*—he has made several versions in different cities—as related to Barnett Newman's “zip” paintings that feature a vertical stripe or “zipper” down the

SHAUN GLADWELL, *APOLOGIES 1 - 6*, 2007-09.
PRODUCTION STILL. PHOTO: JOSH RAYMOND.
© SHAUN GLADWELL. COURTESY THE ARTIST &
ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA



center of the canvas. Coincidentally, the Newman “zip” painting *Onement II* (1948) from the Wadsworth Atheneum’s collection hangs on the wall outside Gladwell’s *MATRIX* exhibition, creating a direct dialogue with his *Linework*.

Gladwell’s interest in dialogue follows through to the visitor experience. In *Yokohama Linework*, the viewer shares a real sense of this streetbound adventure in the physical presentation of the work in the gallery, where the video is projected life-size onto the floor. Gladwell also considers the viewer’s encounter in the presentation of *Interceptor Surf Sequence*. With the desert landscape projected onto a floating screen in the center of the room, the viewer gains a sense of the magic felt by the black-helmeted figure hovering in the vast natural space.

The typical viewer experience is once again altered in *Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi)* (2010). Rendered in slow motion, a ghostly surfer (the artist) sits astride his surfboard awkwardly floating in an intense blue haze of rhythmic ocean waves. Intermittently, he bends down to put his face underwater. After several minutes, something clearly seems amiss. The video is projected upside down, making the viewer feel upside down. In fact, the surfer who appears right side up to the viewer is actually

SHAUN GLADWELL, *FIGURE/FIREARM STUDY (COLT M4)*, 2010.
EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPH FROM VIDEO STILL, 40 X 30 INCHES.
PHOTO: JOSH RAYMOND. © SHAUN GLADWELL.
COURTESY THE ARTIST & ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA





sitting on his surfboard, upside down, underwater, and he occasionally bends up to the surface to breathe. The hypnotic rhythm builds over several minutes as the continual wave movement slowly pushes the surfer closer to the viewer, eventually and startlingly heaving the artist into the foreground in a final violent thrust only to begin the sequence again.

Whether surfing the waters off Australia's famous Bondi Beach or riding the iconic car in the remote desert outback of an iconic film, Shaun Gladwell's work can be seen as both entirely Australian and universal, through his references to thrilling youth-based physical activities, utilizing skateboards, surfboards, motorcycles and muscle cars. Likewise, Gladwell's engagement with Australian history and politics finds interesting counterparts in American culture, with controversial historical figures and indigenous populations. Art historical connections teased from Gladwell's videos include Renaissance paintings depicting the *pietà*, German Romantic painting, Hudson River School landscapes, and mid-century abstraction. The latter two references and the addition of a Colt weapon find a strong footing in the collection at the Wadsworth Atheneum. But for all these fascinating connections, nothing emerges more forcefully than the potential of the human body to perform astonishing feats. In Gladwell's vision, the freedom in motion draws out a true sense of awe and wonder.

Patricia Hickson

Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

SHAUN GLADWELL, *CENTRED PATAPHYSICAL SUITE (PROSTHETIC GROUP)*, 2009-11.
THREE VIDEO STILL. PERFORMERS: KEVIN HARRIS, KATHRYN PUIE, BILL SHANNON.
© SHAUN GLADWELL. COURTESY THE ARTIST & ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA



SHAUN GLADWELL

EDUCATION

- 2002 Associate Research, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK
- 2001 Master of Fine Art (Research), College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
- 1996 Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours First Class), Sydney College of the Arts, Australia

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Shaun Gladwell: MATRIX 162*, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, USA
Stereo Sequences, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Australia
- 2010 *Portrait of a man: alive and spinning/Dead as a skeleton dressed as a Mountie*, Georgia Sherman Projects, Toronto, Canada
Art Feature, Art 41 Basel, Switzerland
MADDESTMAXIMVS: Planet & Stars Sequence, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
Interior Linework/Interceptor Intersection, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, Australia
- 2009 *Recent Photographs*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
Seven Year Linework, Spacex, Exeter, UK
MADDESTMAXIMVS: Planet & Stars Sequence, Australian Pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale, Italy
- 2008 *Shaun Gladwell*, University Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego
Double Voyage, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
- 2007 *MADDESTMAXIMVS*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Australia
In a Station of the Metro, Artspace, Sydney, Australia
- 2006 *Shaun Gladwell*, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Centre, Buffalo, NY, USA
- 2005 *Shaun Gladwell: Various Roles*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia
MMVBREAKLESS SESSIONS, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Australia
- 2004 *New Balance*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), Perth, Australia
- 2003 *Silent, Ambient and Harder Remixes*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Australia
- 2001 *Recent Projects*, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, France
Cycles of Radical Will, Imperial Slacks Gallery, Sydney, Australia
- 2000 *Kickflipping Flâneur*, Artspace, Sydney, Australia
- Shaun Gladwell has participated in numerous international residencies and commissions and has exhibited extensively worldwide, including the 2005 Yokohama Triennale, the 2006 Bienal de São Paulo, the 2006 Busan Biennale, the 2007 and 2009 Venice Biennales, the 2008 Taipei Biennial, the 2010 First Mardin Biennial in Turkey, and the 2010 Cairo Biennial.

Born 1972, Sydney, Australia
Lives and works in London, England

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Unless otherwise noted, all works are
Courtesy the artist & Anna Schwartz Gallery,
Australia.

Yokohama Linework, 2005
Single channel SD, 16:9, stereo
Running time: 16:30

Apologies 1 - 6, 2007-09
Single channel HD, stereo
Running time: 27:10
Cinematography: Gotaro Uematsu

Interceptor Surf Sequence, 2009
Dual channel HD, 16:9, silent
Running time: Channel 1: 15:14
Running time: Channel 2: 12:28
Cinematography: Gotaro Uematsu
The Douglas Tracy Smith and Dorothy Potter Smith
Fund, 2011.4.1

*Centred Pataphysical Suite Suite
(Prosthetic Group)*, 2009
3-channel HD, 16:9, silent
Various running times
Performers: Kevin Harris, Kathryn Puie,
Bill Shannon
Videographers: Josh Raymond, Gotaro Uematsu

Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi), 2010
Single channel HD, 16:9, stereo
Running time: 11:21
Cinematography: Josh Raymond

Figure/Firearm Study (Colt M4), 2010
Video still from *Double Balancing Act*, 2009-10
Pigment print on archival paper
40 x 30 inches
Photo: Josh Raymond



COVER IMAGE:
SHAUN GLADWELL, *INTERCEPTOR SURF SEQUENCE*, 2009.
VIDEO STILL. PHOTO: JOSH RAYMOND. © SHAUN GLADWELL.
COURTESY THE ARTIST & ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, AUSTRALIA

ARTIST TALK

MATRIX Gallery Talk
Shaun Gladwell
Thursday, June 2, 2011
6:00 pm

Shaun Gladwell will discuss the work in his exhibition in the Avery third floor galleries.

THANKS

Cecil Adams, Ann Brandwein, Erik Bowen, Mary Busick, Tania Doropoulos, Mark Giuliano, Ritz Henton, Simeon Kronenberg, Adria Patterson, Allen Phillips, Josh Raymond, Edd Russo, and, especially, artist Shaun Gladwell.

MATRIX 162 has been made possible in part by the current and founding members of the Wadsworth Atheneum's Contemporary Coalition.

Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by donors to the Greater Hartford Arts Council's United Arts Campaign and the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.



Wadsworth
Atheneum
Museum of Art

600 Main Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06103
(860) 278-2670

www.wadsworthatheneum.org



¹ Saul Bellow from "Him with His Foot in His Mouth," quoted in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), p. 796.

² To American eyes, Gladwell emerges from the driver's side window, suggesting that he is "ghost riding" rather than "car surfing." In ghost riding, a person puts the car in gear and performs the same action while the car moves without a driver.

³ Shaun Gladwell quoted in Ihor Holubizky, "Intentionality and Interpretation," *Shaun Gladwell: Videowork* (Sydney, Australia: Artspace Visual Arts Centre Ltd., 2007), p. 43.

⁴ *Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981), and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985)

⁵ A bushranger is a runaway convict who hides in the Australian bush.

⁶ *Interceptor Surf Sequence* is a two-channel video. Projected on the front and back of a suspended screen, the back image follows the exact same cycle as the front. However, the weather conditions are remarkably different with a blanket of heavy clouds overhead and a storm striking on the horizon.

⁷ See Nikos Papastergiadis, "The Stranger on Via Dolorosa: Shaun Gladwell's *Apologies 1-6*," Shaun Gladwell: Interior *Linework/Interceptor Intersection* (Campbelltown, Australia: Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2010), p. 45.

⁸ See Blair French, "The Curvature of the Earth," *Shaun Gladwell: MADDESTMAXIMVS, Planet & Stars Sequence* (Melbourne, Australia: Schwartz City, 2009), p. 142.

⁹ Blair French, "Return to Earth," *Shaun Gladwell: Videowork*, p. 9.