

# GUY SHERWIN'S 'LIGHT CYCLES'

Christine Park Gallery, London: 13 to 27 February 2016

*being a pyramid  
of thoughts on how an enquiring  
mind investigates the subtle art of cinema*



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Norwich MMXVI

**1** A show that's open only two weeks is as ephemeral as a frame of film passing through a projector gate. But just as the 1/24<sup>th</sup>-second frame can leave a lasting impression, so can a two-week show.

**2** Guy Sherwin's 'Light Cycles' comprised seven installations: seven 16mm projectors showing films on a loop, with seven screens. Five of the films can be found on his DVD, 'Short Film Series 1975-2014', but subtle as these are, the installations complexified their subtlety.

**3** It starts and ends with the screen. The first installation on entering the gallery was 'Projector illuminating itself': a strip of transparent leader, spliced as a mobius strip, throws its rectangle of light on a mirror angled to throw the image onto a mirrored screen which throws the light back at the projector projecting its image onto a wall. This is the basic proposition of the elements of cinema: light, a strip of film, a mechanism for running it through a projector, and a resulting image – or shadow play – on the screen.

**4** Then we had *Metronome no. 2* and *Portrait with Parents no. 2* (in which Guy can be seen in a mirror filming his parents standing either side of it – it's his signature film, as it were). The fourth installation was *Eye no. 2* showing in a dark alcove: the projector is at an angle so the projected image of the single eye is at an angle.



In the far space were *Breathing no. 2*, *Clock Screen no. 2* and *Tree Reflection no. 4*. The tree image is at the far end, one of the most compelling films from his DVD, since it starts with a single tree silhouetted against the sky, and its reflection in water across which a duck swims. In its second half the reflected tree is in the upper half of the screen (the film running backwards, and taking the duck backwards) and the real tree, the source of the reflection, is in the bottom half. I still have not fathomed the wizardry of how he does it. (I think this is a good thing, but it might not be, in view of his strategy to unpack all the elements of film projection so you can see what film consists of.)

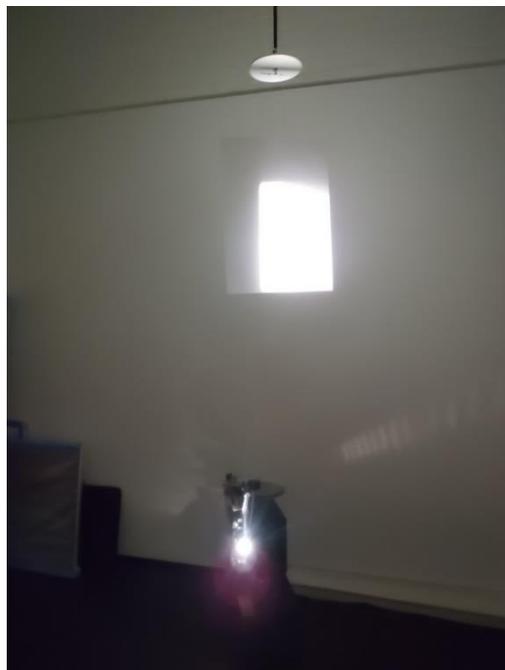
**5** It is the screen that is important. The gallery was painted a light light grey, not quite white really, and the films are all black and white. It sounds very simple, drab even, but it is the screens that add the subtlety. The screen rectangle for *Metronome* was a medium grey;

for *Portrait with Parents*, a dark grey (and with a mirror surround, so you could glimpse yourself watching the screen, putting you in the picture so to speak); for *Eye* the rectangle containing the angled screen was black, which accentuated the luminous image of the eye; for *Breathing*, the rectangle was partially black, partially the colour of the gallery grey, a



perfect imagination for the image which is of a pregnant belly subtly rising and falling in a breathing rhythm, the skin catching the light, and luminous on the black. This belly occupies the bottom four-fifths of the screen, while the image covering the top fifth of the screen is of a window onto a garden with what looks like a line of washing in the distance. This was depth of field reinvented.

**6** The most curious screen was a rectangle of paper suspended from the ceiling onto which an image of a sliver of light was projected from the floor. The light beam hit a mirror that angled it up to the ceiling. At first I thought the screen was moving randomly, like a mobile hung from the ceiling, but closer examination showed it attached to a clock mechanism on the ceiling, hence the title *Clock Screen*.



The rectangle of paper does one complete revolution every sixty seconds, and the projected image is timed to catch it on a cycle: before your eyes – above your eyes actually – the screen changes shape, the sliver of light alters too, and then for a glimpse you see the texture of the paper lit up by the angled light which promptly disappears.

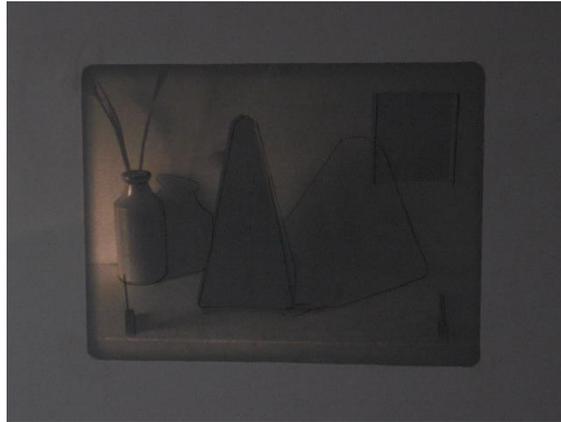
**7** There is a philosophic quality to Sherwin's work in two ways. First, he takes apart the elements of cinema, turns them inside out, helping us to see the illusion. He gives us self-knowledge. Secondly he plays with levels of reality. Plato's Theory of Forms posited three levels of reality: 1) the heavenly invisible form; 2) the imperfect earthly copy, which is second order; 3) the artist's copy of the earthly, which is third-order. You cannot expect an artist to subscribe to the idea of his or her work being a third-order, and therefore inferior, description of the world, but the distinction Plato makes between how artists imagine the world and how it actually exists is a profound and necessary one. Sherwin, as well as anyone, explores this distinction for the art of film, and does so without an axe to grind, that X is better than Y, that engaging with deconstructed reality is better than ignoring it – rather he invites us to take an aesthetic pleasure in understanding the process.

**8** The best was saved for the last. *Metronome*, also compelling on the DVD, was even more so in the installation. The film is a witty counterpointing of metronome time and the cycle of sunlight moving across a wall. The image is a still life: a light-coloured vase on the left, a reproduction of Vermeer's 'A Lady Seated at a Virginal' on the right, and two smaller side-on objects, one in the bottom left, the other in the bottom right.



Most prominent is the pyramidal *Metronome* placed slightly towards the left of the frame, and whose shadow grows into the right of it as the sunlight passes over it. Time passes: the bottom frame of the sash window moves across and up the screen; the *Metronome* arm moves metronomically. Enough? There is more: the film is made by stop motion so that the hours of daylight are compressed into three minutes. But the *Metronome* arm is slowed down, and even arrested by only activating the shutter as it reaches its furthest point to right and to left. The passage of time is counterpointed with the stopping of time. Enough? No. Because when the film ends, in order to start again, we discern drawn on the wall a sketch of the elements in the film – the vase, metronome, rectangle, shadows. So film time, endlessly decaying, is counterpointed with the drawn moment, the human assertion of

timelessness, the picture that exists beyond its maker's life, and if not destroyed by history then beyond history too.



**Coda** *Eye* was made striking by the fact that you can see the brushstrokes on the wall where the image is screened. For a moment you think it's painted, and you think – or at least I thought – of Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring'. And Vermeer is no accidental presence in *Metronome*, for his painting works by creating the illusion of reality and in its stillness contradicts reality, and in its longevity bids for eternity. *Metronome* makes the same bid.



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