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GRANT STEVENS

Dark Mess

Oblivion, rainforests, and happiness

I should go walking more often. When I walk, I grow quiet. Usually I go walking when I can't seem to shift something: I get stuck while completing a project, or something gets lodged in my heart. I put on my shoes and walk. More specifically, I bushwalk. There is a firetrail that I usually take that is surrounded by thick scrub, solid cliff walls, and valleys of gum trees. The sounds of the leaves in the wind and the crunch of rocks beneath my runners take over. Tension and worries fade. I leave the house restless and consumed; I return restful and released.

In *Dark Mess*, Grant Stevens embarks on a similar voyage. However, in Stevens' imagery and soundtrack, nature seems to threateningly heave and shudder. Veiled in green ferns and blue shadows, what lurks beneath the rainforest is not peace, but something else entirely. *Dark Mess* plays out over three channels, each cycling through individual montages of rainforest footage. A synthesized track of distorted sound accompanies. It becomes increasingly obtrusive and noisy, building slowly into a soaring, buzzing, and, eventually, shredding score of electronic feedback. At first, the screens are filled with the oceanic tones of ferns and moss; there's barely any sky or ground to be seen. The pace of the montage gradually increases. Shots of shadowy voids and sparse leaves and twigs begin to dominate. As the rainforest darkens and blurs, the droning track crescendos into a climax of reverberations. Then, finally, the soundtrack falls back into a low orbiting hum. Stillness returns. Lush bluey-greens fill the screens once more.

In its slow build towards an ecstatic release, *Dark Mess* develops with cinema-like suspense. In thriller films and crime dramas, various devices, including drawn-out tracking shots and minimal dialogue, are used to leave viewers squirming as they wait for the inevitable. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975), and Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) are made memorable for their passages of intensifying intrigue and uncertainty. The accompanying score can also escalate tension. Ennio Morricone's isolated thuds and minimal melodic tones provided an unnerving aural backdrop to *The Thing* (1982). By contrast, overwhelmingly layered arrangements were used to heighten the madness of *The Shining* (1980). In Stevens' installation, it is both his uncomfortable soundtrack and ominous imagery that produces a kind of anticipation that we are used to experiencing in theatres, but not necessarily in rainforests.

When the tension is finally released in *Dark Mess*, there is a sense of calm and resolution. What exactly is resolved, however, remains ambiguous. Derek Attridge suggests that 'a complex of feelings' is often encountered during affective events or moments.¹ Affects – sometimes referred to, or separated from, emotions – are often experienced as a knot of feelings. Affect can be difficult to talk about not only because it is dynamic, but because we are often searching for more than one word to describe what we are going through. These feelings often seem at odds; grief often comes with relief, heartache with excitement, apprehension with curiosity. *Dark Mess*' rise and fall is somewhat sublime in a Kantian sense; something sublime, like nature, can be at once a source of pleasure – without strict purpose – and displeasure – boundless and overwhelming.² Kant's sublime is described by Yu Li as a two-step 'crisis-and-recovery mechanism' that entangles a positive experience with that of something terrible.³ In *Dark Mess*, there's a strange sense of satisfaction evoked during a close call with annihilation.

So, it seems that nature is not a one-way ticket to happiness, even though a number of platitudes, self-help strategies, and nature walk enthusiasts – myself included – would certainly have us hoping so. This is not necessarily a problem. Stevens is not convinced happiness is the norm, nor totally taken with western society's obsession with gaining said happiness.⁴ I find myself in much the same boat, mostly because happiness is not static, often uncontrollable, and without autonomy; it is fleeting – perhaps made more precious because it is temporary – and often only possible after a period of 'not being happy'. There is also pleasure in revealing sadness, anger, and fear; in allowing social cues and expectations to tumble in favour of 'letting it all out,' so to speak. Sometimes happiness finds its home in moments that are simultaneously upsetting or uneasy to justify.

That does not mean we should not try and search for particular experiences in nature, or in other places for that matter. Stevens has told me he's up for anything – rainforest treks, mindfulness exercises, aura photography – and interested in the variety of aesthetic and affective experiences these practices may bring.⁵ However, he seems to also suggest that it might be useful, from time-to-time, to press beyond prepackaged experiences with emotions or the great outdoors, and instead allow for guttural, multilayered, and sometimes unfamiliar responses to our surrounds. Here, the rainforest remains cold and beautiful. However, Stevens has also made it sinister and a little menacing. *Dark Mess* takes us on a disembodied nature walk to a sublime oblivion.

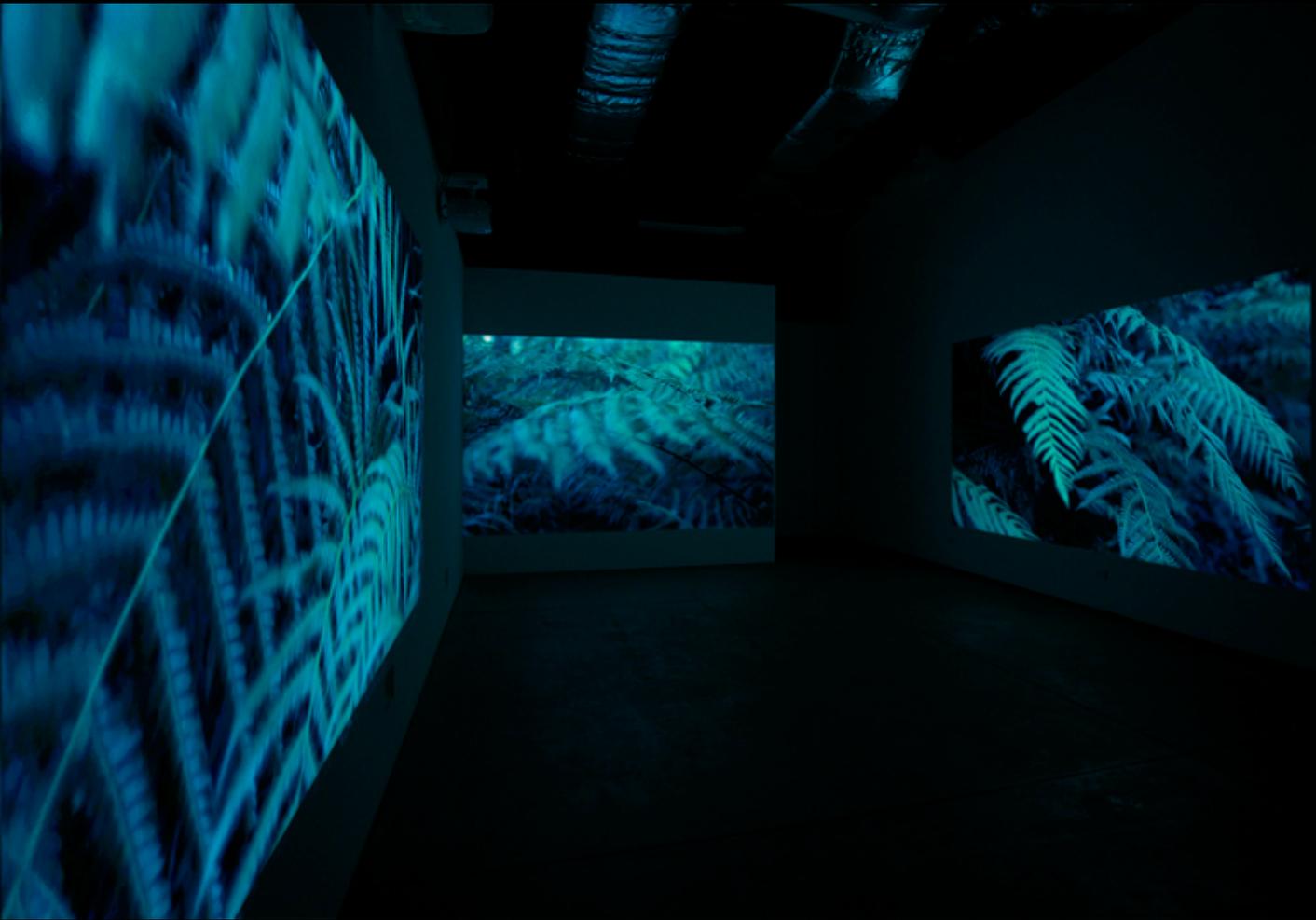
- Melinda Reid

1. Derek Attridge 'Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect and Performance.' *Textual Practice*. 25.2. 2011, 330.

2. Yu Li 'The Beautiful and the Sublime: Kant's Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained.' *Studies in Romanticism*. 42.2. Summer 2003, 188.

3. *ibid.*, 189.

4 & 5. Grant Stevens, personal interview, 11 July 2015.



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Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space | 282 Petrie Terrace Brisbane Q 4000 | GPO Box 3197 Brisbane Q 4001 | www.boxcopy.org | info@boxcopy.org

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