

MOVING LIGHT

Jonathan Jones & Sriwhana Spong

Curated by Consuelo Cavaniglia

Light is something that is neither tangible nor static; it expands outwards from a central source fading with increased distance; it cannot be contained but it can be shaped, sharpened and defined; it does not have a mass but its metaphorical associations ascribe a weight value to it; and light is inextricably tied to its opposite, darkness, as light and dark are only ever around the corner from each other.

Light is an element of choice for both Sydney based artist Jonathan Jones and Auckland artist Sriwhana Spong, one that successfully allows both to speak about a number of concerns. *Moving light* is an exhibition that brings the work of these two artists together – drawing connections between their ideas and initiating a conversation between two thoughtful contemporary voices. Jones and Spong have worked collaboratively with other artists on numerous projects yet have not previously worked together; it is this propensity for collaborations alongside their shared interests and aesthetic compatibility that drew me to initiate an exchange between these two artists through a combined exhibition of their work.

In *Moving light* we see a selection of Jones and Spong's works, some made specifically for Fremantle Arts Centre and others chosen for their relevance to the theme of the exhibition. Spong's film *Beetlejuice* (2007) sees the use of light as a recording tool which rather than presenting an image registers a repeated action. In this work the artist punched holes in a super 8 film, producing a white, rough-edged circle on a black field. The circle is both a mark and an opening: we look from a black space into white light.

The idea of 'walking into the light' conjures up notions of crossing over into another world, possibly a spirit world, a world that Spong explores in relation to her Balinese heritage. A culture that she only came to know later in life, the Balinese remains a foreign, other world, one that Spong describes as "a glimmer of something fed to me through shadows and whispers."¹ Shadowy yet eminently present the Balinese heritage forms part of her identity and mingles with her everyday so that in works such as the *Muttnik still* series (2005) we see Balinese shrines made out of Coke bottles, plastic bags and cigarettes combined with marigolds and incense.

In her work the Balinese reference does not lapse into exoticism, as Spong makes no false claims to a culture that she is largely unfamiliar with, and neither does she ignore her contemporary connections. The representations of her estranged heritage pull traditional and contemporary iconography together, that of a traditional culture with a contemporary consumer-driven space; these are two coexistent spaces.

The idea of overlapping and merging spaces is seen in Jones' light installations where individual lighting elements (fluorescent tubes or light bulbs) come together to create fields of intense light. In works such as *White lines* (2005) and *Under the aegis* (2006) a multitude of fluorescent tubes trace large geometric line drawings on lengths of wall. Drawing diverse sources, including minimalism, abstraction and traditional Indigenous line patterns, Jones' designs repeat single elements to form an overall pattern. Through his work Jones looks to the idea of community, where individuals come together to form a social whole. Jones says, "What my work comes down to is trying to capture the notion of

a community. It's an idea that perhaps there is one point of light and it's producing a body of light. What if you put another light with it? There's an overlap, a linking."²

Bringing individuals into a community in an idealised vision of togetherness has no place in the considerations that Jones makes in his work, rather what he raises are a number of questions about the space of overlap between two entities. Using elements that share a common structure Jones' formal arrangements invite speculation about the nature of the part and the whole, the individual and the group. Jones asks, how do individuals relate to each other? How do they communicate? What does it mean to be a part of a community? In an Australian context it is particularly relevant for an artist with an Indigenous heritage (Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri) to be considering these questions.

In works such as *Lumination interplay wall weave* (2003), Jones draws or embroiders repetitive patterns onto large sheets of MDF with electrical cord; the very cord that connects the light bulbs, which form a lit border at the foot of the work. These pieces are often built or 'stitched' into the walls of the spaces they are displayed in. Attaching these works to the walls of Fremantle Arts Centre is particularly relevant as the building's history is one of segregation and confinement. The largest public building constructed by convicts in Western Australia, its earliest function was as a lunatic asylum. Connecting to this colonial and institutional history further impacts on Jonathan's considerations of inclusion and exclusion within communities in general and Australian society specifically.

Jones's use of the unassuming fluorescent tube and the mundane and familiar light bulb bring his considerations on community into the life of every person. The materials used are democratic by nature and relate equally to people from all levels of society, meaning that his questions on local and national communities do not remain as conversations to be had by someone else, rather they enter the known, domestic space and invite consideration by all of us.

Similarly Spong takes her viewer into a known domestic sphere as she focuses her camera on sets and installations assembled in her back yard. In *7Days* (2007) a shrine set up in the artist's back yard is filmed over a period of time allowing the work to go through the cycle of being seen in full daylight and then growing darkness. The familiar backyard in this work, however, provides no comfort and instead takes us to the kind of space set up by David Lynch in *Blue Velvet* (1986) when a young man taking his usual shortcut across a field in a sleepy American town finds a severed human ear in the tall grass. The surface of the known and familiar is disrupted by suggestions of things that lie unseen; two spaces are set up – the known and the unknown.

Taking her cues from the films of David Lynch, in *7Days* and *Daytrip* (2006) Sriwhana casts a tightly focused light that like Lynch's headlights on a darkened road picks up only what is immediately lit, while everything else is shrouded in darkness like an unconscious thought. Spong allows the unseen and intangible to sit alongside what can, according to logic, be described as real and believable. Again connections to Balinese culture are set up. In an interview with artist and writer MJ Kjarr, Spong recounts a telling experience: "One vivid memory I have of Bali is being present at a Hindu ceremony when a spirit entered the body of someone present. It was the strangest sound, somewhere between a baby crying and a dog barking. It was an event completely normal and everyday to the Balinese present, but it made me understand my place as an outsider where surface is privileged. It was one of those 'moments' where the world becomes a much bigger, more irrational, and slightly scary place".³

The existence of two spaces, light and dark, seen and unseen, tangible and intangible is often talked about in terms of oppositions yet what we see in the works of these artists is the idea of a conversation between two or more things. Traditional sites of conflict and collision are instead considered as places where things overlap and questions can be asked about how images and objects function in a formal sense and how they relate to one another.

Spong and Jones draw their influences from many varied sources all of which have equal relevance to their work; their respective interests in film, popular culture, traditional Indigenous art and the history of modern art, translate into a presentation of their heritage that is not described in isolation from their highly mobile lives or couched in terms of difference or separateness. Instead they pull together influences and transpose their distinctive visual languages according to the context with ease and a lack of self-consciousness, illuminating spaces of exchange and optimism for artists and viewers alike.

1. Sriwhana quoted in Thomasin Sleigh, 'Shadows and Whispers – 2x2 Contemporary projects' in *Salient*, September 2006
2. Jonathan Jones quoted in Andrew Frost 'Afraid of the Dark' in *Australian Art Collector*, issue 42 Oct-Dec, 2007 pp132-141
3. Discussion between MJ Kijarr and Sriwhana Spong, *Crease Magazine Online*, Issue 4, 2005

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Sriwhana Spong was born in Auckland, New Zealand in 1979. She recently was artist in residence at International Studio and Curatorial Programme, New York and in 2007 was artist in residence at Artspace, Sydney. In 2007 she was included in *Turbulence 3RD* Auckland Triennale, Artspace, Auckland and in *A Tale of Two Cities* Busan Biennale, Korea in 2006. Spong has exhibited extensively in New Zealand and Australia and internationally in Germany, Korea, the United States, China, Singapore and Hungary. Group exhibitions include, *Group Show 1301PE*, Los Angeles, 2008; *Regarding Fear and Hope* Monash University, Melbourne, 2007; *Satellite*, Shanghai, 2006; *Twin Oak Drive 2x2 Contemporary Projects*, City Gallery, Wellington, 2006; *Single Currency* VCA, Melbourne, 2006; *The Greenhouse* Frankfurter Welle, Frankfurt, 2004. Spong's recent solo exhibitions include, *Beetlejuice*, Artspace, Sydney 2007 and *Candlestick Park* Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland 2006.