

A certain distance, endless light

A PROJECT BY
FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES
& WILLIAM MCKEOWN

5 March – 4 July 2010

Co-organised with AV Festival 10: Energy, mima is delighted to stage this exhibition *A certain distance, endless light* by two of the most highly regarded artists of their generation, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996) and William McKeown (b.1962).

In December 2008 mima was invited to collaborate with AV Festival 10: Energy. From the start AV Festival 10 Director, Rebecca Shatwell, introduced the festival theme with great clarity describing energy as a universal force that connects, transforms and renews life. With these themes in mind we identified and secured for exhibition these two remarkable artists whose contribution to art is consistently applauded.

At the heart of this exhibition is light. Light is colour, light is energy, it fuels life and it feeds the spirit, it inspires art, religion and science. In all cultures there is an intimate association with light, between illumination and creation.

For thousands of years humanity has tried to unlock the secrets of light. Modern Art itself emerged from trying to understand the nature of light. Light offers a clue to the whole structure of the universe, it seems to fill all space and allows a certain penetration of the world. Consisting of four rooms, two rooms by Felix and two rooms by William; each one contains a distinct light. Executed with tremendous skill and sensitivity, they display the artists' empathy with form and basic raw materials and attend to complex subject matter as town, country, home, family, love and loss.

The creation of this exhibition is the result of several close partnerships and many inspirational moments. Special thanks to Rebecca Shatwell who was essential in establishing the concept of the exhibition and in identifying early on the significance of this collaboration. Juliet Farrar, Head of Culture and Tourism Middlesbrough and her team for enabling us to take the exhibition outside of the walls of mima through a series of artworks that will be presented on billboards across Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle.

The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, New York, Andrea Rosen, President, Matthew Israel, Director of Operations and Michelle Reyes, Foundation Fellow have provided exceptional assistance and made available crucial information about the artists practice, ideas and personality. We would also like to thank the lenders who have generously supported this exhibition.

Lastly we are indebted to artist William McKeown for his generosity and for agreeing to unveil this important new body of work. The exhibition would not have been possible without his enormous contribution.



LIGHTSTRINGS

In 1992 Felix started his most eloquent works, twenty-four light sculptures each consisting of forty-two, fifteen or twenty-five watt white light bulbs distributed evenly over eleven metres of electrical cord. The works are identical, varying only in their number of bulbs, titles and their installation, which is left to the discretion of the installer.

Sublimely beautiful, yet so commonplace that outside a museum or gallery they resist classification as art, the light strings are his ultimate gesture of involving the audience in the production of meaning and the power of the imagination. A light string is a work of art, the artist explains, that “doesn’t really look like artwork, but its there. You have to take a second look”. Once the piece has been attributed a title, meaning is suggested. mima has brought together six of the ten existing single lightstrings: “*Untitled*” (*A Couple*), “*Untitled*” (*Leaves of Grass*), “*Untitled*” (*Tim Hotel*), “*Untitled*” (*Ischia*), “*Untitled*” (*Miami*) and “*Untitled*” (*rue St. Denis*) each subtitle referring to Felix’s own memories of places, people and ideas.

In embracing the splendour and grace of artificial light, he acknowledges its myriad significations in modern society. Light has functioned as a sign of that modernity: the strengths of the seething city, the comforting warmth of the domestic interior, the brilliance of theatrical illumination, and the seductive illusion of the cinema. The list is almost endless, as are the possible explanations of the work.

THE DAYROOM

Dayrooms are familiar to us as communal living spaces in residential institutions such as a hospital or guesthouse. There is often an attempt at decorating these spaces, aiming to make them more homely and yet they are never quite comfortable; the domesticity of others, chosen by the owner with guests in mind but at the same time not the choice of the guest. Within a hospital the dayroom may be the space where the patient awaits news, perhaps good, perhaps bad; potentially devastating.

For his installation *The Dayroom*, William has constructed a room, a simple cube. From the outside the room is exposed for what it is: a rough framework of wooden struts and plasterboard. Inside the room is plastered to a smooth finish and then painted in a heritage colour called “Dayroom Yellow”. There is an insincerity to the sophistication of the room, amplified by the slightly sickly yellow of the walls and the sodium light emitted by the double fluorescent tubes. The room sits between elegance and artifice.

Inside the room is hung a colour pencil drawing and a painting, representing respectively a single snowdrop and an expanse of sky. These offer a glimpse of a potential outside that can be imagined by the viewer. They are metaphorical windows that stand in lucid contrast to the actual door and window of the room, which serve to remind the viewer of the illusion in which they are involved.

THE DAISY FIELD

“Thus were my sympathies enlarged, and thus
Daily the common range of visible things
Grew dear to me ...”

William Wordsworth

The Daisy Field is a new installation created for mima. It comprises some 70 monochrome watercolours in which the colour wash, having been applied, is gradually removed. This leaves just a trace of its previous colour held within a trembling line; the edge of the painting being the last residue of the initial colour.

Each individual watercolour references a single daisy and collectively they recall the sight of a field of daisies. Encountering this sight for the first time, unexpectedly, the eye becomes transfixed by a sea of white. At first the effect is dazzling: each individual flower blends in to an overwhelming perception of whiteness and light. Gradually the eye becomes attuned to individual nuances and subtleties relishing a beauty of which the mind had previously been unaware.

The origin of the word “daisy” comes from the Old English *dæges eage* or “day’s eye”. Each watercolour is hung at a particular height aligning it with the upper torso of the viewer and directing the attention towards the centre of the flower. This gives the sense of a portrait, directing the viewer’s gaze, but also creating a feeling of the day’s eye looking back at you.

BILLBOARDS

Middlesbrough

Borough Road, cnr. Abingdon Road

North Ormesby, cnr. Lytton St

Newport Road

Sunderland

St. Mary's Way

Newcastle

City Road, cnr. Melbourne St

New Bridge Street West

As part of *A certain distance, endless light* mima will present two billboard works. One installed inside the gallery and one, an edition of six, installed outside the gallery across Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle from 1st – 14th of March.

One is a diptych of a turbulent and brooding sky, the other an image of a lone bird, photographed from below, floating effortlessly beneath an overcast sky. Situated deliberately in the public's path, these artworks gracefully interrupt our daily routines. As with all works by Felix, its meaning is entirely open-ended. With no accompanying text, no explanatory title in view, this haunting image offers itself as a space for contemplation amidst an otherwise crowded urban backdrop. As was the wish of the artist we are delighted to present these seminal works enabling us to continue our mission to bring art into the community.

STACKS

This double stack piece was the centrepiece of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' first exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York in 1990. It consists of two stacks of white paper of identical size. Each 29 inches by 23 inches by an *ideal height* of 26 inches, placed next to each other with their longest side parallel and approximately 10 inches apart.

In the centre of each of the pieces of paper is a text in Trump Medieval font. Felix would go on to use this typeface for the majority of his works involving text. The texts face inwards, as if in dialogue with each other. One reads: **NOWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE**. The other: **SOMEWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE**. At first the two statements appear contradictory or create a feeling of ambiguity. One suggests a yearning for a distant 'better' place, the other affirming that the current location is the best and only place to be. Within the context of this exhibition the dialogue between the two contrary texts **SOMEWHERE... NOWHERE** is an appeal to concentrate on the here and now, to raise hope and nurture local aspiration.

Ideal height refers to the possible changing status of the work's height. As an audience member you are invited to take with you a sheet of paper from the stack, as a result the height of the stack will vary. Felix determined an ideal height for each stack piece, however mima is not obligated to maintain the work at this height. The ideal is only a guideline or a reference to the work's initial installation. Should all the sheets be taken by our audiences over the course of the exhibition mima may choose to not replenish either stack, leaving the space empty for the remainder of the presentation.
