

Hunger of the Void

Catalogue essay

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I had a hole in the middle where the lightning went through it

Told my friends not to worry

I had a hole in the middle, someone's sideshow to do

I told my friends not to worry

Didn't want to be your ghost

Didn't want to be anyone's ghost¹

Ray Harris' exhibition *Hunger of The Void* presents a new body of work exploring nuanced experiences of the void. Through her signature peep-hole dioramas and affect-driven video work, Harris positions the viewer at the edge of the self, looking into nothingness. The works delve into a part of our human experience that is often not spoken about; a hole in the middle, a deep internal emptiness, the sensation of floating above your own body. Driven by a psychological understanding of the void as an internal mindset, Harris offers the viewer the experience of lingering close to the precipice. The works are highly personal and simultaneously give way to an impersonality. Harris uses autobiographical elements but shifts the focus on the void itself, a subject that is not fully knowable and tricky to define.

A new series of peephole diorama titled *Fantastical Escapes* Harris has created liminal, magical spaces referencing the void. Raising one's eye to the viewfinder, Harris invites the viewer to step inside these small psychological compartments. The affective quality of Harris' diorama's places importance on the intersubjectivity of the work; as they invite you in, you become beholden to the void. It is a shared unconscious, even though it is experienced individually. There is an emotional resonance in the feeling of being consumed. Each diorama is dedicated to a single image rendered in three dimensions inside the tiny pocket sized box: a forest, a burning house, an empty lot, a ladder, a ghost, a teardrop. They are not unlike an intrusive thought or a recurring dream, the images are familiar but displaced, and

¹ The National, "Anyones Ghost," on *High Violet*, 4AD, 2010

difficult to shake. In two of the peephole boxes there is text written on the wall; 'Sorry' and 'I made a mistake'. These familiar sentiments, so easily dismissed, reverberate through the small space taking on great import: *Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry* echoes around and around your body. You think about that horrible thing that you never really meant to do. Suddenly you feel claustrophobic, your stomach drops, you close your eyes and see stars, you realise that you haven't taken a breath for a few minutes.

The deep chasm of an internal void feels familiarly abject within the spaces and images that Harris has created. The void is both part of you, and beyond you, and has completely consumed you. The sense of being disoriented by the image is core to how the body of work operates. The works hold within them residue of what is otherwise incommunicable. But rather than attempt to represent the unrepresentable, Harris's work creates an experience where the audience is detached, decentred and isolated by the void. Julia Kristeva describes the abject in a similar language – a spasm, an internal threat, a dark revolt of being. '*Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside [them]self*' writes Kristeva.² It dislodges you from yourself. The void takes over your sense of self, and you become a ghost watching on.

It is from this place of displacement that many of us act out in ways that, from the outside, might be considered bad decisions. Feeling a sense of disconnection from yourself, you might seek out ways to 'fill the void'; pleasure, stimulus, a desire to feel anything or nothing at all. In a psychological sense, this 'hunger of the void' is a yearning that can never fully be satisfied.³ *L'appel du vide: Eternal Flame* provides this opportunity for the audience to seek sensation, to burn or to drown or to be buried alive. The mirrored internal of the box has a *mise-en-abyme* effect ('to put in the abyss'). Harris places the viewers own head within an infinite loop, creating an affective environment for the audience to experience a sensation. What does it feel like to be buried, to decay, and to return to the earth? More than focusing on binaries of life and death, Harris considers the vastness of these void-states, describing them as '*oceans of nothingness, winds blowing through you, not drowning but being deep under the vast water, a sense of calm and being engulfed, a feeling of insignificance, the sensations of the void.*'⁴

² Cazeaux, Clive. *The Continental Aesthetics Reader / Edited by Clive Cazeaux*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2011. p389

³ Muscatello, Clara F, and Paolo Scudellari. "Anger and Narcissism: Between the Void of Being and the Hunger for Having." *Psychopathology* 33, no. 4 (2000): 227-32. p231

⁴ Correspondence with the artist

Speaking with Harris in the lead up to the exhibition, my mind wandered to a podcast that I listened to a few years ago, an interview with physicist Lisa Randall. I recalled Randall's description of dark matter, a substance that we can't see, hear or touch. It's only interaction with 'familiar matter' is through gravitational force. Dark matter makes up 80% of our universe, meaning that it exists all around us and literally passes through us without our knowledge. While it is difficult to detect, dark matter plays an influential role in our universe, one that we are only just beginning to theorise.⁵ Imagining dark matter as it floats throughout our world, I can't help but think, could these gravitational agents be affecting the particles in the world around me? Could the lump in my throat be linked to a heavy clump of dark matter floating through my body? Just like the mesmerising quality of the wind moving through the trees, what is at play isn't always possible to identify or understand.

The dark and melancholy moments of this exhibition are balanced by Harris' handmade, kitschy aesthetic. Exaggerated teardrops, cartoony ghosts & the scale of the tiny spaces give momentary reprieve from the bleakness of the internal psychological states that Harris points towards. They feel magical, mesmerising. Unlike the sublime that we see in Romanticism and Abstraction, which are driven by ego, Harris' voids seek connection through shared experience. The viewer is given the opportunity to be in proximity to the void without the risk of being consumed by it. With such a vast and undefinable subject, *Hunger of the Void* doesn't necessarily seek to illuminate the dark corners of our universe, or of our psyche. But, maybe through shared experience it could help us to understand more about ourselves and others.

⁵ Tippet, Krista and Randall, Lisa. "Dark Matter, Dinosaurs, and Extra Dimensions" podcast audio. *On being*. November 12, 2015. <https://onbeing.org/programs/lisa-randall-dark-matter-dinosaurs-and-extra-dimensions-sep2017/>