Disintegrating the Linear: Time in Simon Finn's *Instability*

Dr. Marilyn Stendera

"We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time."[i] Maurice Merleau-Ponty

'Tomb Entrance' Ink on paper 192 x 112 cm (2018)

The art of Simon Finn has always had a markedly temporal dynamic. Vast structures built and annihilated again and again across different media, their fragmentation across space and time simultaneously methodical and darkly chaotic. Roiling waters and eldritch surfaces held captive in their unrest. Finn's works render cycles of construction and disintegration, of stasis and motion, in ways that shed light upon the underlying structures of our experience of time while shattering simplistic notions of linearity. This is nowhere more apparent than in *Instability*, through which Finn allows us to explore the intertwining of personal and historical time, ancestral memory and radical futurity, artefactual form and temporal function.

The works comprising *Instability* continue Finn's knack for weaving together the digital and primeval in unsettling and deeply affecting set-pieces. Ink drawings of a tomb inspired by those found at the Brú na Bóinne complex, its passages made to align with the solstice sun in a rite both primordial and futuristic. *Cube Analysis*, a looped video of a lone black wooden cube buffeted by the waves, an inky tomb building block summoned to four-dimensional life. The *Spiral* sculptures, cast from digital renderings of tumbling structures, simulations of continual collapse reminiscent of Georg Nees' computer art lent the fascination and dread weight of existential disintegration. *WaterBowl* and *WaterCircle*, imprinted with liquid held in turmoil and recalling the enigmatic ritual artefacts found at Brú na Bóinne. Together, these pieces dramatize the confrontation between the human need to construct that which will outlast its maker with those forces – cosmic, historical, oceanic – that render these efforts both uncertain and transcendent.

In this, Finn's work brings to mind the complexities of temporality, the ways in which what should be closest and simplest – before, now, after – becomes more enigmatic the longer we examine it. One of the enduring puzzles for those who study the experience of time, for example, is how we come to have a sense of temporal *connection*, of moments that are not isolated from one another but instead woven together in beforeness and afterness. This fundamental connectivity is not something that we could have simply deduced from being exposed to now upon now upon now, lone moments falling by us like pearls

without a string. "A succession of feelings, in and of itself, is not a feeling of succession."[ii] How, then, do we come to experience the temporal interlinking that is so vital to our sense of the world? Finn's *Instability* recalls an influential solution to the problem. William James – psychologist, philosopher, coiner of the 'stream of consciousness' and brother of Henry – suggested that instead of looking for a way to explain how one 'now' connects to the other, we must recognise that the very notion of such a present is "specious",[iii] "melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming."[iv] There is no pure now, Henry (and others since him) argued, for each moment always also looks forwards and backwards. The present becomes not "a knife-edge, but a saddleback"[v]– a notion brought to vivid life in the way that Finn explores structure and movement.

Consider the pieces that show construction and destruction rendered from multiple vantage-points across different media – simulated digitally, drawn in ink, enacted sculpturally. The tomb at the heart of *Instability*, a monument received in ways its builders could not have imagined, even as the process of their building across and into time could not have been what it is without these future reinterpretations. In these works, the 'now' is not shattered so much as revealed to have never truly been, at least in the splendid isolation that we have vainly associated with the concept of presence. In resisting attempts to separate the exhibition's temporal loops into sequential narratives, *Instability* both foregrounds and undercuts linearity itself by revealing the latter's reliance upon a deeper temporal intermingling.

'Liquid Cube analysis' HD video still (2018)

In this way, Finn's work also resonates with the more radical temporalities of phenomenological and existentialist thought, which went beyond James' 'speciousness' of the present to propose a complex mutual shaping – an "equiprimordiality",[vi] in Heidegger's words - of past, present and future, one that is multi- rather than unidirectional. Witness how Finn's *Spiral* sculptures are simultaneously blueprints, contemporaries and echoes of the structures (and collapses) they render, each of these three functions generating and generated by the others. *Cube Analysis*, meanwhile, utilises time itself as a medium. The video's looping of the shift between slow motion and rapid reversal destabilises any attempt to order what it depicts into a linear sequence. It invites us to focus not only on what is happening but on the happening itself, on the very texture of temporality. The paradoxical motion of the video – a moment of time caught *in* time, dynamic yet fixed in a recurrent return, a motion in stasis that both disrupts and amplifies the rhythm of the waves – reinforces the intertwining of past, present and future, with each frame becoming each of these to itself over and over again. This sense of rupture and the cube's stark, hypnotic presence recall Malevich's *Black Square*, itself now disrupted by being de- and re-contextualised

in four dimensions. Time is here revealed as that which underpins, intensifies and challenges the heightening of form, leaving its marks on the digital even as it does through the cracking and warping of Malevich's aging paint.

The cubes that feature throughout the exhibition – are also both remnants and building blocks of the tomb, itself incarnated paradoxically in the ancient and the digital, materially and in ink. The tombs of *Instability* and Brú na Bóinne give meaning to and are given meaning by one another, and by the solstice light that binds these modes of time-keeping together across conceptual epochs – the seasonal illumination that is both origin and end, that preceded the tombs in a way that only their future states could concretise, and that will outlast them in a way that their creators could envision more clearly than their inheritors. Not to be outdone by his creations – those messages whose meanings are shaped after they are spoken – Finn's own artistic process is marked by this temporal comingling. He notes in conversation that *Instability* draws out motifs that he can only now say that he was working towards, a statement that is more than a re-interpretation of the past, indeed is revelatory of a past that could only become what it is in light of a particular future.
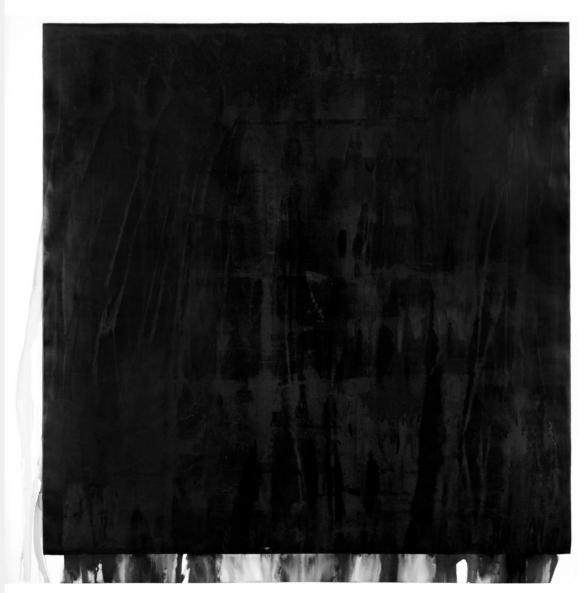

'Quad spiral' Wood, enamel, synthetic polymer 80 x 40 x 80cm (2018)

The complexities of this temporal interplay branch out into intricate dialectics of factuality and freedom, of the personal and the historical. For the phenomenologists and the existentialists, we ourselves are structured as a temporal intermingling, always-already thrown into our facticity – that into which we came, which preceded us and which we did not cause, yet for which we must still take responsibility – while also stretching into possibility as such, always projecting, always "more than" we "factually" are.[vii] The simultaneity of grounding and radical openness recalls the oceanic motifs that feature in Finn's work. The waters in turmoil, the waves that carry and threaten to drown the black cube, are primordially familiar as the ancestral home of all life, and yet instil a vertiginous sense of the unbounded, of vastness, of the terrifying freedom of cosmic possibility. In this, *Instability* recalls Da Vinci's *Deluge* drawings, a recurring influence in Finn's work. Tumbling structures overcome by the primal water of creation and destruction, suggesting an apocalyptic reckoning for accrued histories – whether personal or social – and yet also a confrontation with the untameable uncertainty of indifferent natural forces. We see this also in the motif of the tomb. The *Instability* works and their sibling-ancestors at Brú na Bóinne participate in a shared

founding – wrought by the tradition of the original tomb-makers and the natural phenomenon of the solstice light – even as they depart from it in the futuristic forms of 3D-printed ritual bowls and videos of tomb blocks, representing paths of radical possibility projected and carved out. Like the multifaceted lines of collapse in Finn's simulations, these paths will multiply, diverge, reinterpreting each step through the next.

This is not to say that what came before - the tomb sites and their builders – become transparent or easily assimilated into reconfiguration. Facticity carries with it the weight of shared history, of awe before the intimate reality of another. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that the past is always "the past of the other",[viii] which we never master yet must account for (and be accountable to). In the various forms of Finn's work, in their enigmatic reach, our confrontation with possibility is nonetheless framed in terms of the resistance of the other – the tomb-builders, their entombed, the artist, the audience – to easy reinterpretation. The tomb works resound with the weight of that which we cannot grasp, a balanced leap into possibility that is neither unfettered nor burdened.

'Abysmal' Ink on paper 115 x 115 cm (2018)

INSTABILITY [MARS] Gallery | 19 July - 18 Aug 2018

[i] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), 490.

[ii] William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1890), 1: 628.

[iii] James, *Principles*, 1: 613.

[iv] James, *Principles*, 1:608.

[v] James, *Principles*, 1: 609.

[vi] Martin Heidegger*, Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 378/329.

[vii] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 185/145. Compare Sartre's take on this – Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 2005), 148.

[viii] Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Love and Justice," in *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), 99. See also "Diachrony and Representation," in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duequesne University Press, 1987), 112.