

Rodney Graham, *A Little Thought*, March 30-June 27, 2004, Art Gallery of Ontario

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Number 67, June 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/20378ac>

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Publisher(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1711-7682 (print)

1923-8932 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Anzai, T. (2005). Review of [Rodney Graham, *A Little Thought*, March 30-June 27, 2004, Art Gallery of Ontario]. *Ciel variable*, (67), 30–30.



Rodney Graham

A Little Thought
March 30–June 27, 2004
Art Gallery of Ontario

Earlier this year, the Art Gallery of Ontario played host to a major retrospective of Rodney Graham's work, featuring over twenty-five works from an artistic practice dating back to the 1970s. While much of the focus was on his recent film and video installations, also on display were photographic works, a selection of his sound and music output, and an assortment of his notes, scripts, costumes, and props.

The sheer scope of Graham's body of work is difficult, if not impossible, to categorize, and the exhibit was a highly successful and entertaining look at one of the major artists of our time. Here I try to grasp some of the works on display at the exhibition with specific reference to notions of time.

*Who is it that does not love a tree?
I planted one, I planted three,
Two for you, and one for me,
Botanical anomaly...*
— Rodney Graham, *Theme from Phonokinetoscope*

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Graham's signature images were photographs of inverted trees. He produced the first such image in 1979, using a large camera obscura in a field near Abbotsford, B.C. This was followed by *Millennial Project for an Urban Plaza* (1986), a scale model of a camera obscura theatre in a large, tower-like structure where viewers could view a young sapling growing over time into a mature tree. Several other images of the arboreal turned upside-down appeared in later series of black-and-white photographs, *Flanders Trees* (1989) and *Oxfordshire Oaks* (1990).

In 1996, Graham produced a replica of a U.S. mail carriage from 1904 and converted it into a *Camera Obscura Mobile*, which was then sent overseas to France and parked in front of trees that had been exported from the United States in the nineteenth century. The idea of the mobile camera obscura was then combined with a revisit to his *Millennial Project* in what became *Millennial Time Machine*. Permanently installed on the grounds of the University of British Columbia in 2003, the *Time Machine* is a nineteenth-century horse-drawn carriage converted into a camera obscura, with its lens fixed upon a young sequoia tree. Graham describes the *Time Machine* as a kind of "philosophical toy" in which spectators "looking forward, may see backwards and upside-down, that which is forever receding behind them."

*I'm the 'i' you failed to dot,
From the land that time forgot.
I just lost my train of thought,
I saw someone sitting on a rock.*
— Rodney Graham, *Theme from Phonokinetoscope*

Fantasia for Four Hands (Detail)
two chromogenic photographs
256.5 x 195.5 cm each; edition of 4 and artist's proof
2002
Collection of Gerald Sheff and Shanitha Kachan, Toronto (Toronto venue)
Private Collection (Los Angeles and Vancouver venues)
Photo Credit: Tom Van Eynde
Courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
© 2004 Rodney Graham

Referring to the opening scenes of *Phonokinetoscope* (2001), the person sitting on a rock in this case is the artist himself as he prepares to ingest LSD and take a ride on his bicycle through a park in Berlin. As an installation, a modified turntable in the gallery fitted with a 12" vinyl record (Graham's own psych-rock score), when played, is meant to activate a projector. Perhaps more than any other work, this piece unifies Graham's dual approaches to his musical and artistic modes of production.

Leading up to this work, and after the years of utilizing the camera obscura, Graham himself became the central subject of his works. In 1994, the first of these features, *Halcion Sleep*, was produced as a video in which the artist ingests a sedative at a suburban hotel and is then shown passed out in the back seat of a vehicle as he is being driven back into the city.

After this came a trilogy of period films, *Vexation Island* (1997), *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999), and *City Self Country Self* (2000). Integral to the viewing experience of each of these films is the notion of the loop. In *Vexation Island*, the artist, in a Robinson Crusoe-type scene, awakens on a tropical island and proceeds to shake a coconut out of a tree (for a moment filmed upside down), only to have the coconut hit him in the head and render him unconscious again. In *Ramblin' Man*, we see Graham meandering out on the range with his horse before settling down next to a tree with his guitar to perform the eponymous track, then getting back on his horse to ride off into the landscape, only to re-emerge and repeat the whole sequence of events. Finally we see Graham, playing the dual roles in *City Self Country Self*, first walking through the streets of a nineteenth-century French town as both the urban dandy and the rural dweller, leading to the eventual encounter in which he kicks his own alter ego squarely in the ass. At this point, the images and the audio are edited into a slowed-down distortion as we watch the kick, over and over again, and as the sequence comes to an end, the film loops back to begin all over again.

The effect of Graham's loops and his treatment of time are akin to the extinguishing of time itself. In the period pieces, though we may gauge a particular historical time that such situations could belong to, the looping of the films causes us to be lost in a set of moments, actions, and scenarios, seemingly without end, and without a future. The figure marooned on the island is doomed to a life of coconut-induced unconsciousness with apparently no way out, the cowboy must always reappear to sing his song, and the country bumpkin is forever subjected to the abuses of the urbanite.

Perhaps too, the structure of the loop acts as a way to transcend time. Here I am reminded of Graham's sound work *Parsifal* (1990). Based on a set of bars found in Richard Wagner's music, which were then manipulated into a set of loops by his assistant Engelbert Humperdinck for an 1882 performance of *Parsifal*, Graham assigned a set of epicycles within this loop based on a formula using the fourteen prime numbers between 3 and 47. The result here is a loop in which the fourteen instruments or voices in the orchestra do not join together for 39 billion years.

No one will ever hear Graham's score for *Parsifal*, at least not in its entirety. In this sense, it is a work of art that defies all formal viewing – or, in this case, listening – procedures. As for *Parsifal* though, the solution is perhaps already there, somewhere in between the repeating loops of his films or in his own *Time Machine*. **Tetsuomi Anzai**

Tetsuomi Anzai is a multidisciplinary artist and writer. Originally from Vancouver, he now resides in Montreal.