

Kitchen-Sink Surrealism by Jon Davies

Over the past two decades, London-based artist Jennet Thomas has evolved a distinctive video practice embracing a homespun folk aesthetic to produce absurdist narratives that stubbornly refuse reason. Complexly strange, Thomas's work is committed to developing new and experimental forms of storytelling, all to make sense of what seems like an increasingly non-sensical world.

In tapes like *The Man Who Went Outside* (2008) and *Because of the War* (2005), Thomas takes the sober British authority figure – he could be broadcaster, politician, manager, teacher, clergyman, what have you – and subjects him to her comically bizarre scripts. The arbiters of rational order become a fount of delightful ludicrousness, or, as Sally O'Reilly has written, society's "illusion of consensus" and "legibility" are befuddled and people must figure out this new confusing situation.

In *Because of the War*, an undescribed and abstract war transforms the world as it had once been understood. Thomas seems to celebrate the resilience and creativity of everyday people who create an alternative economy to "get the things they needed" according to a "new philosophy": "Because of the war things were changing – very few toys or games were left, and music was almost over... Popular foods were found to be unstable. Additives that had been put in there some time ago to keep the flavours and shapes strong had started telling, weeping, crying out." However, some people were not able to adapt to the new conditions quite so easily, "they were too full of memories to make the change... They found that the difference between the anticipated and the actual was becoming increasingly unclear." While those who successfully adapted are productive – planting knick-knacks from around the home in order to harvest sausages, for example – others engage in more dysfunctional or agonistic pursuits, like the boy who snaps the fuselage of a plane in half merely by gesturing towards it.

The Man of authority who recurs in Thomas's work – he is a yellow-painted narrator in *Because of the War* – is just one ingredient of the rich stew of mass cultural ephemera and the detritus of popular memory that she cooks up in each tape. Glimpsing into these concoctions gives us a potent portrait of the United Kingdom's quietly deranged collective consciousness. Thomas's work taps into distinctly British currents of surrealist moving pictures, from Lindsay Anderson's carnivalesque 1973 epic *O Lucky Man!* to the idiosyncratic work of fellow video artist John Smith to odd small-screen series like *Doctor Who*. The TV becomes a gateway for the surreal to be unleashed on the domestic home, providing entertainment for what Francis McKee has described as a British suburbia "seething with unconscious and repressed desires." Thomas is also highly attuned to how music becomes part of the fabric of everyday people's lives, with many characters telling their stories through folk ditties or strange songs throughout her work.

Thomas's tapes appear so very weird due to her juxtaposition of very everyday props, sets and figures (including her own family and friends) – as well as her

endearingly low-budget special effects – with her often otherworldly subject matter and existentialist concerns. The seemingly simple takes on an uncanny power: characters are painted unnatural shades of purple or green to signify their alienness, while local charity shops or the soil of one's backyard garden can always be relied on to produce fascinating talismans. In *Important Toy* (1997) and *SHARONY!* (2000), little girls develop extreme attachments to objects that they find, to the point that stuffed toys and plastic women alike almost become cursed by the girls' obsessive cling, ending up ruined or destroyed, tossed aside until the next fun thing arrives.

In *SHARONY!*, two girls find an inch-tall girl in the garden, and place her in a dollhouse wallpapered with pornography to help speed up her sexual development. Trenchantly reflecting on how oppressive gender roles are constructed and passed on generationally, Thomas has the girls coo, "your curves will have the potency of mass production!" A "light and empty" blow-up doll that the girls eventually hang, cut up and re-bury (for perfect plastic women like Sharony seem to provoke both adoration and violence simultaneously), they pointedly ask their new friend, "what's it like to be as close to nothing as you?"

Children figure large in Thomas's work, their minds blending the realm of fantasy with their own often-skewed interpretations of the perverse grown-up world around them. It is almost as if their malleable minds are capable of seeing things that grown-ups can't, such as the potential for glory in the toys and dolls featured in the tapes above, or the meaning or logic that might be behind the abstract shapes that haunt Thomas's work. In Miranda July's video *Getting Stronger Every Day* (2001) the traumatized characters see "mythic objects" represented as abstract shapes that, like them, don't or can't "fit in." These flat graphic designs seem to be an alien presence encroaching from another plane of existence. Each of the characters tries to "match" this form to an object from real life (such as the shape of a teddy bear's leg) as a way of making it "fit." To July, these mystical objects are metaphors for stories that we hear and try to apply by overlaying, usually unsuccessfully – on top of our own lives: "I like to think about how these dimensions interact simply and can be enacted: real life / story / worldly / spirit / video / flat drawing."



In Thomas's cosmology, a similar community of shapes stand in for abstract or ungraspable concepts, as if these lofty ideas are so beyond imagination that they must take on the simplest forms possible to be represented visually. (Francis McKee has also likened them to memes.) In *The Man Who Went Outside*, both the enigmatically vague sites of "the outside" and "the game" that the narrator discusses take the form of "shifting structures and interdependencies, folding into itself a number of complex variables, in order to produce recognizable outlines/outcomes."



In *4 Ways He Tried to Tell You* (1999), an invisible, Christ-like "He" manifests his presence by gesturing with a tree branch or with the limp arm of a hanging bathrobe. One of the four ways "He" tries to tell you (what?) is by manifesting as an abstract shape – vaguely fish-like, semi-phallic. According to the child narrator, "He" is a frustrated person who is finding it hard to die completely so "bits of him are going everywhere." Apparently "He" is trying to communicate something to us through this recurring shape, even though no humans can figure out what it means.



In what is perhaps Thomas's masterpiece (so far), *Return of the Black Tower* (2008), John and Jennifer testify as if in an AA meeting to a mysterious, unsettling experience they've endured that has apparently transformed society: "I know some people have seen it as a stain, a pattern stuck in the visible world, but I'm not sure that's how it seems to me... some people said it's like meaning embedded into the relation of things... it was like a shape... a kind of multi-dimensional hole that keeps rotating." In a fascinating analysis of the work that contextualizes it with John Smith's *The Black Tower* (1985-7), Sally O'Reilly suggests that perhaps the work is set "in some hitherto unencountered parallel universe where these are the first individuals to have undergone an aesthetic experience." Art before it had a name.



Like much of Thomas's work, this video is stricken with an atmosphere of nervous anxiety and imminent magic: the world is not what you thought it was, and its hitherto unimagined true form will likely make you uncomfortable. In *The Man Who Went Outside* she warns, "Don't be alarmed, when the first baby comes out to greet you, it may make unwelcome gestures: the pain shape, the lost shape, the broken shape." Even if they confuse and trouble us, it would serve us all well to embrace the myriad of Thomas's visionary shapes – no matter how broken they might be.