



**PETER TILLEY**  
**SEEING THE SHADOW**



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## THE DARK SIDE

*One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.*

- Carl Jung

*This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.*

- William Shakespeare

The optical effects of light and shade have been explored throughout art history from the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux to Da Vinci's use of 'chiaroscuro' in Renaissance Italy. Shadows in western culture have often been associated with sadness and melancholy, mystery or danger. Surrealist painters in the twentieth century employed the dark silhouette to create dream-like compositions whilst in American 'film noir' cinema elongated shadows added drama and suspense.

The symbolic effects of the cast shadow have long fascinated the Australian artist Peter Tilley. Tilley is a contemporary sculptor from the mid coast town of Newcastle in New South Wales, with more than three decades of exhibition practice under his belt. His recent doctoral research and art practice has focused on the myriad of ways in which the shadow has been used as a subject throughout western art and in particular for its associated meanings in psychology and philosophy.

Tilley's figurative sculptures and abstract assemblages have always possessed a contemplative edge. From still-life

tableaux to free standing sculptures based around the figure, his work is rich in complexity, evoking a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. Working with traditional sculptural materials such as bronze, steel and cast iron, as well as mixed media, pigments, resin and found objects, the artist attempts to express metaphysical concepts and meanings through the highly physical medium of sculpture.

The compositions are visually reserved yet potent; intricately calm and ordered but conceptually they can pack a punch. Peter Tilley's craftsmanship may be fastidious and meticulous, but his philosophical scope is vast. In his artistic practice, the sculptor has often drawn on humanity's dichotomies such as life and death, hope and despair, permanence and decay, the internal and the external, and now the figure and the shadow.

He employs simplicity of form to convey layered complex meanings. His sculptural figures are simplified and generic rather than individualised portraits. The use of



an unassuming figure, the 'everyman', is usually grouped together with everyday objects, to portray universal human experience. There is stillness in Tilley's compositions with the central sculptural figure appearing somewhat pensive or reflective. However, the works evoke too much of a sense of unease to be appear quiet or meditative.

In his current body of work, each sculpture is dominated by a figure casting a long shadow, which the artist connects to Jungian psychology and its associations with the unconscious self. The artist employs figurative realism to reveal the underside of human nature, the parts of ourselves we do not normally reveal to the outside world.

The symbolism of the shadow in ancient Egyptian funereal sculpture is another guiding influence. The minimalism and restraint of these sculptural forms are also echoed in Tilley's eloquent figures. In Egypt and other ancient cultures, there was a common belief that someone's shadow was seen as a person's spirit double and an outward manifestation of their soul.

His work *Seeing the Shadow* draws on the Greek legend of Narcissus, but Tilley equates the myth to Jung's theory of the shadow as the dark side of the soul. Composed of cast iron and polished stainless steel, it features a male figure gazing into his own reflection. The reflection is however a mirrored silhouette of the figure's own shadow, which becomes larger and smaller according to the positioning of the observer, revealing the malleability and elusiveness of the human persona.

In *Follower* the artist again draws on this ambiguity between shadow and

reflection. In this piece, he literally replaces what would have been the solitary figure's cast shadow with a mirrored image of its shadow. The work creates an optical confusion in the viewer, as well as a sense of disquiet. The male figure appearing in front of a mirror faces not his reflection but his shadow instead; perhaps forced to confront his inner unconscious self.

Another freestanding work, *The Wandering*, is influenced by early Christian legends of Jewish people in exile. In Tilley's sculpture the shadow of the itinerant figure sits below it enlarged and cruciform in shape, perhaps like an omen of the underworld. According to the artist, the solitary figure is 'unwilling to let go of the present, yearning for a past just gone and apprehensive of an uncertain future.' Iridescent blue in colour, the shadow indicates that the wandering figure's journey may be as much spiritual as prosaic.

Presence and absence is always present in Tilley's work. He states that: 'The shadow is a dark spot that confirms an absence by its very presence'. He draws on the work of Surrealist artists such as Rene Magritte, whose poetic yet mysterious images often featured absent silhouettes. Like Magritte, Tilley searches for the hidden meaning underlying objects and human figures.

In *Departing*, the human figure has left the composition entirely, leaving behind an ominous dark shadow in painted steel resting on the floor. A heavy cast iron chair sits where perhaps the figure once was. This enigmatic work suggests multiple interpretations; the presence of the shadow acts like an imprint of the absent figure's lost self, the dark side that has been repressed or denied.



Materials are an important part of the artist's practice and he often imbues them with conscious meaning. He regularly uses weathered rusty metals, which he believes sit well in the Australian landscape, as well as hard materials such as steel and cast iron, long associated with modernist sculpture. Coloured pigments in deep earthy tones are often also applied, particularly in his two dimensional relief works.

His employment of coal and lead has often addressed environmental issues associated with their use, however lead has an additional association with coffins and reliquaries, symbolizing mortality and the passage of time. In *Tainted Shadow*, the figure casts a shadow composed of coal fragments; symbolizing both the 'dirty' environmental impact of coal due to human consumption, as well as the 'grubby' negative side of our personalities.

Tilley's penchant for found objects, such as ceramic fragments and bird bones,

can also be seen in *Undiscovered Self*. A black cast iron figure is trailed by a long shadow composed of small bones set in stained plaster. The shadow literally appears like the 'emotional baggage' that the downcast figure carries around behind him, seemingly without awareness. Yet the delicate bones are hollow; they appear without substance. The artist implies that many of our concealed troubling thoughts are inconsequential, if only we have the courage to face them.

Using the figure and the shadow to portray human presence and absence, Peter Tilley continues his metaphysical enquiry, namely the pursuit of a harmony between life's opposing forces. The fact that he is addressing these deep philosophical concerns through such physical and robust media is testament to his masterful skill as a seasoned sculptor, as well as suggesting new depths as a visionary visual artist.

**VICTORIA HYNES**



PETER TILLEY: SEEING THE SHADOW  
 21 March - 14 April 2018  
 The University Gallery, The University of Newcastle

Peter Tilley is represented by May Space, Sydney

Photos: Dean Beletich  
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 Front: *The Wandering* 2017 (detail)  
 Back: *Undiscovered Self II* 2017,  
 patinated cast iron, bone, stained  
 plaster, painted timber, 47.5 x 120  
 x 29.5 cm

Left fold: *Follower* 2016 (detail),  
 patinated bronze, polished stainless  
 steel, black perspex, Corten steel,  
 58.5 x 46 x 31cm  
 Right fold: *The Wandering* 2017,  
 patinated cast iron, painted steel,  
 square bar, 146 x 57 x 26 cm

Inner: (left) *Tainted Shadow* 2017/18,  
 painted resin, crushed coal, painted  
 timber, 49 x 68 x 19 cm  
 (middle) *Seeing the Shadow II*, 2017,  
 painted cast iron on polished stainless  
 steel, 43 x 78 x 15 cm  
 (right) *Undiscovered Self II* 2017 (detail)

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