

The Sound Recordings of Tony Woods

Phil Edwards, RMIT University, Australia

This article is a personal reflection of the relationship between artist Tony Woods sound recordings and his visual art practice. Complimenting Tony Woods' predominantly painting based visual art practice were his parallel sound compilations of often unnoticed background noises of the natural world and community activities. Used in conjunction with his Super-8 film practice and paintings these recordings emphasised his use of shadows in his work to explore themes of time passing and mortality. These recordings form a rich parallel contribution to the history of abstractions role in Australian painting by an often overlooked yet major artist.

Keywords: Sound art, Morality, Painting

Dying is sometimes seen as moving to a state of shadows from light and death may act as a lens for reviewing a lived life. The purpose of this reflective essay is to rethink the metaphorical role of light and shadow as themes in Tony Woods' sound art and paintings. When Australian artist Tony Woods passed away, aged 77, in 2017, he left behind a legacy of hundreds of paintings, hundreds of hours of field recordings and super-8 films and video works.

I recently spent many hours making a digital record of his of sound recordings so that they may be archived for future historians, critics and artists to consider in respect to their own times, the era the works were made in and in relation to Woods' main practice which was painting.

Tony Woods had a varied and complex fifty year art practice and personal history which developed and expanded in multifarious directions both locally and internationally. Woods

was born in Hobart, Tasmania in 1940, five years before the end of World War Two at a time that was not an easy economical time for the average Australian. He developed an interest in art at a young age and was initially a self-taught watercolour landscape artist before studying formally at the local Hobart Technical School.

In a book published by Mollison Communications in 2013 about his life as an artist titled *Tony Woods: Archive ... work for the eyes to do* (Gaynor) fellow artist and admirers contributed chapters on all aspects of his complex career. I contributed a chapter to publication concerning his field recordings. The book was lavishly printed with nearly two hundred colour filled examples of works throughout his painting career as it moved from figuration in 1962 to abstraction in later his life.

As noted in the books press release, it was edited by curator Andrew Gaynor and had contributions from Australian arts critic and fiction writer Lesley Chow, independent curator and art historian Dr Sheridan Palmer, poet and architect Alex Selenitsch, artist Dr Gary Willis and freelance writer Jake Wilson. The book is accompanied by a fifty five minute DVD documentary titled *And* (Johnson, Chu, 2013) about Woods' life and career compiled by artist, writer, photographer and filmmaker Miriam Johnson and producer Roy Chu. This DVD included eight of Woods' Super-8 films and a number of interviews with not only Tony Woods' himself but also sculptor Stephen Walker, musician Nick Lyon, Australian poet Vivian Smith, art collector Terry Whelan, author Sue Backhouse and artists Jon Cattapan, Godwin Bradbeer, George Davis, Max Angus, Nick Selenitsch and John Aslanidis. A common thread I found running through nearly all of the chapters and recorded conversations was Tony's interest in shadows and light as sources for structure and meditation in all aspects of his work. The cover of the book has an image of light shining through the boards of what seems to a wooden door. The book is also accompanied with a personally signed monotype of this image.

As I recently compiled a record of Woods' complete field recordings, comprised of nearly two hundred hours of material, I was given course to revisit my thoughts about what I had

written on Tony's field recordings from 2013. Each of the CD's containing his eclectic collection of local ambient sounds were all recorded on both a small portable cassette tape recorder and a H4 Zoom recorder. They were then collaged as sonic essays and portraits of his immediate and experienced life. To me, they present his observations of light and shadow through the sensibility of his listening experiences. They are, in fact, work for the ears to do and, so, are intimately related to his investigations into, and vision of, mortality as it was expressed in his paintings. Nearly all of the one hundred and sixty CDs were labelled so as to be able to identify the source of the recordings. All CDs are given titles, like his visual art works and copyrighted which gives an indication of the seriousness of intent with which Tony recorded these works. Recorded over a nearly ten year period, the CDs have titles such as "time compression", "the memoirist" and "then, here, now".

As well as having poetic titles, each disc matter-of-factly lists the sources of sounds such as wind, parrots, ambulance noises and tree lopping. There is a sense of the impermanence of life inherent in the recordings as they are diaristically compiled, sometimes with layers from human activities not often noticed except as background noise. This relates sonically to the images of passing light and shadows Woods' used a subject matter and motifs in his paintings.

When Woods was awarded a Harkness Fellowship in 1968 he moved to New York, along with fellow artist Brett Whiteley whom he later exhibited with, lived in the infamous Chelsea Hotel and painted in a nearby studio. The transience of time was made evident to him when a warehouse fire in 1969 destroyed the work he had made in New York and he had to return to Australia empty handed. He remained friends with Whitley but did not achieve the same level of fame and notoriety on his return to Australia. They maintained their friendship and did collaborate and exhibit together in 1971 at *The Festival of Light* in Perth, Western Australia. I have often wondered if the loss of the body of work in New York had a long-time effect on the construction of future works in all the mediums he had worked in: paintings, Super 8mm film and field recording collages and sound compilations.

There is a sense of the artist recognising the passing of time as a natural, if often overlooked, everyday phenomenon; of an eternity being just another moment in time; inevitable yet needing to be noticed. I worked with Tony on three occasions. Once in a live improvised music performance with fellow artist Kristian Brennan at a Super 8mm presentation of one of Tony's short films at the NOVA Cinema, Carlton, Victoria, once when I used one of his field recordings as a sound piece in an installation exhibition at the former artist run space CLUBSPROJECT, Melbourne in 2005 and once when we collaborated to make an improvised music and field recording CD replete with visual artworks by both of us for the cover artwork.

Issued as a signed limited edition in 2004, the work was titled "Fitzroy Duo" and released under the pseudonym of BERT ALPHETT, which was a pun on the word alphabet. Tony collaged some of his field recordings onto existing improvised piano tracks previously made by me. The CD recording originally was seventy nine minutes long and had seven tracks listed by Tony as follows:-

1. piano & crickets & ambience – 15.00 minutes
2. piano & bells & Woods studio ambience – 15.00 min.
3. piano & solo percussion – 10.00 min
4. piano & birds – 12.00 min
5. percussion & voice & piano- 4.00 min
6. "Bert" (Phil) & studio ambience – 18.00 min
7. "Bert" (Phil) & sound & voices – 3.54 min

These original basic recordings are credited in Tony's hand writing as being constructed by:- Phil Edwards – piano & bells, Tony Woods – other. This recording was copyrighted on the original CD and dated as being made on 4 September 2004. All of the recordings used in this collage were recorded by both of us earlier in that year but Tony was responsible for the sound collage. It was subsequently edited in length of time.

As mentioned previously, the other occasion Tony allowed me to use one of his sound

recordings was as sound accompaniment to a series of small abstract paintings exhibited at CLUBSPROJECT in 2005. The thirteen minute sound recording selected by me was of a dying insect and titled the exhibition and installation was titled “Eulogy for Dying Blowfly”. The sound on the CD was credited to both Tony and myself - before he passed away, Tony and I disagreed, in a good-natured exchange, about whether it was the sound of a dying bee or blowfly. Played very loudly over the sound system in the gallery, the whirring wings of this seemingly inconsequential insect roared theatrically like the sound of a jet plane engine.

The CD we released to coincide with the exhibition, while it credited both of us as artists, also credited a mythical composer named Marco Timerez. This name was intended to reference the explorer Marco Polo and time itself. As humorous as we intended the name of imagined composer to be, there was also a certain gravity accompanying its creation as the dramatic noise of a seemingly inconsequential death of an insect dominated the exhibition of expressive abstract paintings.

The relationship between light and shadow in Tony’s paintings and the ambience of his collected field recordings of the forgotten background sounds of social activities and natural events in his Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy act to comment on the transience of life and the necessity he felt we must all make to observe and listen to our total environment as much as possible in order to appreciate the brevity of time as it passes. I am in accordance with these ideas.

REFERENCES

Gaynor, A. (2013) (ed), *Tony Woods: An Archive*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne.