

TIME TRAVELLERS

Christopher Allen

Velocity

Drill Hall Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, until December 14.

THE experience of time keeps taking us by surprise. We long for something to happen and then it is over; we are momentarily absorbed in what seems like a timeless state and then we are rushed away into futile activity again; worst of all, we discover we are growing older and we see that process happening in others. As children we think age is an ontological state; later we begin to see the process unfolding, and eventually we perceive the agedness of the people we meet with disconcerting clarity.

Philosophy and theology have long realised that time in this sense cannot pertain to a god or to any ultimate conception of being, yet it is an inescapable fact of the phenomenal world, the world as lived by the human mind and body. Moreover there is a certain rate of time, or pace, at which the phenomenal world as we know it seems to cohere, just as a musical recording has to be played at a certain speed and a film must be projected at a precise rate.

This seems to be sort of concern that lies behind *Velocity*, a new exhibition curated by the Drill Hall Gallery's director Terence Maloon, formerly the distinguished curator of special exhibitions at the Art Gallery of NSW.

As we enter we are greeted by a large abstract painting by Derek O'Connor, a bright mass of colours and strokes evoking a disturbed, restless energy but suggesting above all the blur of a figure moving too fast for the shutter speed of a camera, or a digital image breaking up. *Velocity*, at any rate, here seems to exceed the capacity of the medium to register appearance.

Around the corner, as we enter the exhibition space proper, two symmetrical projections by Semiconductor form a kind of frame to the exhibition, establishing the ultimate reference point of cosmic time. The videos, based on astronomical photography, show stars, nebulae and solar flares, all choreographed, as it were, into formal patterns and rhythmic sequences and accompanied by music that seems to translate the celestial phenomena, as indeed the title *Brilliant Noise* suggests, into quasi-synaesthetic equivalents.



Yet these elegant compositions, beguiling at first and recalling the ancient and fascinating idea of the music of the spheres, ultimately remind us that there is no music in the barren world of space. Pascal was perhaps the first to say it, only a couple of generations after Shakespeare had written the beautiful passage of *The Merchant of Venice* in which Lorenzo explains the old doctrine to Jessica. The telescope, in the interim, had revealed the infinity of space and Pascal had at once understood what this meant: a terrifying *silence eternal* replaced the reassuring harmony.

The starry vault of heaven, as Kant said more than a century later, is a quintessentially sublime spectacle — one that is both frightening and exhilarating in its grandeur, but above all utterly foreign to the scale and temporality of human life. As we contemplate the stars or flares in these projections, we realise we have no meaningful grasp of the duration within which they exist.

From cosmic temporality we find ourselves suddenly in the all-too-familiar regimes of urban time — omitting the natural and more congenial cycles of the year, the seasons, months and day and night. Such intervals, though governed by planetary motions, are elastic and variable and constantly subject to the additional vicissitudes of weather. Modern urban time, on the other hand, is mechanical, utilitarian and ruled by the clock.

It was the industrial revolution, with its factories and the need to co-ordinate large workforces, that changed the management of time, which had always been inherently fluid in the country or even in the shops of small trades-

men. Above all, it was the development of modern mass transit systems, to allow workers to move efficiently from their homes to their factories, that determined the triumph of clock time: every great Victorian railway station has a large clock prominently on its facade.

Here we find ourselves in the most enclosed and mechanical of all forms of train travel, the underground metro systems which are part of the hidden infrastructure that allow big cities to function. The idea of travelling underground — in that dark underworld — was initially so unappealing that some people doubted it would ever be embraced by the public. But there was no alternative and commuters were compelled to venture into the subterranean world, where, cut off from natural light and other sights and sounds, they found themselves in a temporal milieu that was fundamentally contradictory, composed of high-velocity transit from point to point alternating with periods of enforced stasis.

Waiting is a universal experience: humans have always waited for morning or evening, for summer or autumn, for birthdays, celebrations, the return of loved ones. But modern mechanical transport introduces another variation: a train, like an aeroplane, is meant to leave at a certain hour. We hurry to get there on time, because if we miss it, it will go without us; but then we end up waiting for its arrival, and that seems to be a new kind of expectation.

Waiting in a train or underground station, or even for a bus, is an experience of time grinding to a halt. It is always more pleasant, if distance permits, to walk than wait for a bus, because in walking — interacting with our environment as we go at a pace that suits human consciousness

A still from Merilyn Falrskye's *Stati d'Animo* (2006-11), above left; *Through the looking glass* (2008) by Gilbert Bel-Bachir, above



— we feel alive and connected to the world. When we wait for a bus or train, on the other hand, it is as though that pace which is proper to human life has been suspended, and we find ourselves in a kind of dehumanising void.

The fact that we are often waiting with others only makes matters worse. Our sense of shared humanity diminishes in proportion to the density of the crowd we are in, and few environments are more alienating than a mass of people waiting for a train on a platform. This seems to be the experience evoked in Robert Boynes's digital prints of underground stations, with their shadowy figures and hints of menace.

In the largest of these compositions, a triptych, the central panel is occupied by a dark, threatening silhouette that looms towards us, backlit by a luminous wall, apparently of glass bricks. On either side, we see shadowy and disembodied figures reflected in the convex mirrors used to see around corners, images of the insubstantial and transient presence strangers have for us in such circumstances.



Both the note of menace and the hint of surveillance complicate the bare experience of waiting, and this theme is carried further in the pictures by Jon Cattapan, in a green that makes us think immediately of the images produced by infra-red night vision devices. This impression is confirmed by two infra-red photographs from his period as an official war artist in East Timor (2008) in which we see heavily armed soldiers on patrol at night.

They are waiting too, but what they are experiencing is the alertness of danger rather than the boredom of inactivity. The larger paintings extrapolate on such themes, but translated into everyday urban life — in its more dangerous, nocturnal aspect. Spaces seem strangely vacant yet threatening, while figures are pale silhouettes, like after-images of passers-by who have departed from the site.

The exhibition continues in two smaller galleries, one of which is devoted to the photographs of Gilbert Bel-Bachir, who also reflects on the disruptions of time and consciousness occasioned by mass transit, in his case buses.

As already observed, when we walk we interact with the world at a pace that is natural to the human mind. Although we may not pay attention to every progressive shift in the perspective we have on the world, our minds are habituated to stitching together those things that we observe consciously and those that are only subconsciously noticed into a continuously unfolding panorama.

Travelling at higher speeds disrupts this process to varying extents, so that the world we glimpse outside tends to become a discontinuous sequence of pictures. At the same time, separated from oneness with the world through which we are passing, we are drawn back to a sense of our subjectivity and to the gap between our minds and the world that exists, enigmatically, outside. Bel-Bachir has found a very simple but effective metaphor for this experience in the windows of the buses in which he travels. Scratched, painted in graffiti, or covered in water droplets by rain, the win-

A still from *Brilliant Noise* by Semiconductor (Ruth Jarman and Joe Gerhardt; 2006), above; *The Passenger* (2009) by Robert Boynes, below

dow is no longer fully transparent. We are at the very least obliged to take note of its presence overlaid on the world outside, and in some cases, as in a poetic sequence of three rain pictures, it reduces the world to silhouettes dimly made out through the water veil.

The final room contains a video work by Marilyn Fairskye, loosely inspired by a painted triptych by Umberto Boccioni, one of the pioneers of futurism, the main artistic movement to celebrate speed as a positive value. Prout was thinking of them when he ridiculed the idea that an accelerating modern world called for a correspondingly accelerated art.

Boccioni's subject was train travel, but Fairskye has updated the reference to the quintessentially contemporary setting of the international airport, and her work is an absorbing meditation on the varieties of alienation we experience in this place where we feel, from the moment we pass through security, that we have entered a limbo in which neither space nor time retains its familiar properties.

The airport above all is a place of waiting, of transit, of directionless animation in which we are surrounded by strangers who are likewise lost in space and time. Fairskye evokes this disconnection by turning the figures who pass through our field of vision into insubstantial, shadowy ghosts that appear and disappear with a restless, fitful motion accompanied by constant and disconnected chatter.

Outside, there are shots of planes on the tarmac, always seemingly in the grey light before dawn or after dusk, reflecting the suspended time, the temporary paralysis of the vital pace of human life. Just before the end of the film, there is a shot of a plane taxiing out to the runway. And then it simply vanishes: it is a quietly disturbing moment, reminding us that the processes of life can equally well come to a stop.