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**JONATHAN THOMSON**



Jonathan Thomson, **Shadow Sculpture 15** (maquette), 2014, acrylic, 40 x 14 x 0.3 cm. All images: Courtesy of Jonathan Thomson.

# The Substance Of Shadows

*The poetry of shadows can be mysterious, which is why we may be either unnerved or attracted to them. Shadows are often an overlooked absence, but their transient forms underline the reality of things and can illuminate truths about life's myriad forces.*

By Jonathan Thomson

**A**t first glance the phrase “the substance of shadows” seems like an oxymoron. Shadows don’t have substance. We all know that. We first encounter them early in childhood and soon discover that they are not material things but simply an absence of light. Shadows are a form of absence along with voids, silences, and all other invisible, ineffable, and unknowable things. But these absences are not without power. They are not nothing. They are an integral part of life and its expression in art, music, and literature. They have a very real existence in the here and now and, at the same time, are a metaphor for all that lies beyond the boundaries of our knowledge or comprehension.

Shadows are seductive although most of the time we tend to disregard them. When we look at the world, we tend to concentrate our attention on objects rather than their shadows. These overlooked absences are the subject of my sculpture. The works in this series, *The Substance of Shadow*, explore notions of contemporary beauty through revelation and concealment.

According to legend, the art of painting was invented by tracing an outline around a man’s shadow. Shadows in art first appeared in Roman times, in what is known as the fourth Pompeian wall style. These painters employed light and shade, contour shadows and highlights, as illusionistic effects. These skills were then lost for a thousand years until they were re-invented in the early Italian Renaissance beginning with Giotto and crystallized further by Masaccio

and Cennini and Alberti, both of whom developed a three-tone scale for depicting light, shadow, and highlights.

In 1490–1493, Leonardo da Vinci undertook an influential analysis of light and shadow. He recognized: “shadow is a more powerful agent than light, for it can impede and entirely deprive bodies of their light, while light can never entirely expel shadow from a body.” I was also particularly taken by Leonardo’s observation: “shadow is the means by which bodies display their form” and wondered just how far this idea could be pushed, even though he also cautions against harsh shadows and says: “light too conspicuously cut off by shadows is exceedingly disapproved of by painters.”

**M**y interest in shadows stems from light. In 2007 I made a series of paintings called *White Girls* that were conceived as an expression of the eternal feminine and were made by flattening the image and reducing it to a series of stylized lines without any tone or modeling. They were based on a reductive approach to line that stems from printmaking where the practice of hand-carving the block in reverse to the



**Jonathan Thomson, Shadow Sculpture 21** (maquette), 2014, powdercoated aluminum, 38 x 17 x 0.2 cm.

finished printed design makes the careful placement of each line a particularly terse discipline. The title of the series refers to the fact that they were all painted in a pure-white matt gesso and set against a thick impasto, glossy-white background.

In these works the careful use of line demarcates the relationship between figure and background and highlights the beauty of the feminine curves. The formalist purity of line brings both line and volume and figure and background into a simultaneous opposition and balance with one another in an expression of unity and harmony. The quality of line is expressed in the way the curves enclose and describe volumes despite the area thus enclosed being presented as absolutely flat. The line draws the viewer into sensations of three-dimensional space solely by means of explicitly two-dimensional forms and devices.

The clean, pure, unsullied line of *White Girls* lends itself particularly well to depiction in neon. Neon is a marvelous material because its strident brightness compels attention. When the line is illuminated, the artwork is no longer passively waiting to be observed, but may force itself into your experience. Like many artists, I am fascinated by light. The existence of beauty is not contingent on it ever being seen, but in order to be able to perceive visible beauty we must have light because without light there is no sight. Light is not exclusive to beauty, but

it is an essential factor without which all others are meaningless. Light is an essential component of the aesthetic of beauty.

For most of the history of art, artists have focused on making representation of things made visible through light. In the 19th century, the representation of light itself became the central concern of painting. “The sun is god,” were JMW Turner’s last words. He is known as the painter of light because of his interest in the use of brilliant colors dissolving into one another. Similarly, the Impressionists wanted to depict the color of light and their use of broken brushstrokes, a high tonal key, pure color, and a direct manner of painting was all directed to the study of momentary effects. The motif in their paintings may have been a landscape or a figure or an object, but their objective was to render the play of light in the air around the surface of the things that they saw.

In the 20th century there was a paradigm shift away from the representation of light to the reality of light itself. Neon is an essentially 20th century substance. The simplicity and clarity of the medium, and that of the messages it conveys, links it chronologically and conceptually to Pop Art. But neon is a material that requires highly specialized technical



**Jonathan Thomson, Shadow Sculpture 24** (maquette), 2014, powdercoated aluminum, 40 x 13.5 x 0.2 cm.



**Jonathan Thomson, Shadow Sculpture 23** (maquette), 2014, powdercoated aluminum, 39.5 x 11.5 x 0.2 cm.

skills and equipment. The glass tube must be shaped by a hot-glass worker, and then a vacuum created inside the tube before it can be charged with neon gas. A drop of mercury is also needed as this gets vaporized at very high voltages and it is this gas that carries the electrical charge from one end of the tube to the other. Practically all artists who use neon have to give their 1:1 designs to a neon factory, which then makes the actual work.

**B**ecause I like the hands-on manual labor of making artwork, of using my hands to manipulate materials, I was pleased to discover a twenty-first century material called electroluminescent (EL) wire that I myself could work with basic tools and a soldering iron. EL wire is coated in a phosphor that glows continually 360° along its length when a current is applied to it. It can be bent by hand to almost any shape and command attention in a similar way to neon, but at low voltages and without the fragility or toxicity of glass neon. It offers a degree of detail and delicacy of scale that can never be matched by either conventional neon or LED.

My *Light Girls*, *Still Life*, and *Cloudscape* series of works were all made by hand embroidering EL wire



**Jonathan Thomson, Neon Nude 1**, 2010, 9mm white 4500° neon on acrylic in custom steel frame, 144 x 81 x 6 cm. Edition 3 + 1AP.

onto powder-coated aluminum panels. The figure and floral and cloud motifs in these works reflect my interest in sen-

sual forms, transience, elusiveness, and fragility as fundamental components of beauty and as representative of the joys and sorrows of life and love. Beauty is relative to different times and different cultures and all too often the delight it gives us is tempered by the fact that it, too, like laughter and music, the perfume of flowers and the bloom of youth, will fade. All things must pass, but in our hearts and minds, that which we find beautiful is a possession for all eternity.

These images are pared down in the simplicity of their line and minimalist in their appearance. They strive to give form to the indeterminate, to render the invisible visible and to give the fleeting intangibility of time solid form. They engage with light as a form of energy and also with all of its metaphorical connotations. The use of physical light to make art conveys important messages about the nature of art and light and enlightenment. The luminous brightness and clear radiance of white light is a metaphor for revelation, illumination, awareness, wholeness, harmony, and grace. Light is an evocative symbol of life, salvation, knowledge, clarity, perfection, and enlightenment. My use of electroluminescent wire is an explicit reflection on the mechanisms of signification by presenting



**Jonathan Thomson, EL 10**, 2011, electroluminescent wire on aluminum composite panel, 41 x 31 x 5 cm.



**Jonathan Thomson, EL 8**, 2011, electroluminescent wire on aluminum composite panel, 41 x 31 x 5 cm.



**Jonathan Thomson, Shadow Sculpture 11** (maquette), 2014, powdercoated aluminum, 38 x 17 x 0.2 cm.

the nude or floral display or cloudscape as a sign. Their sinuous curves function both as signifier and signified. But unfortunately the light produced by the EL wire is fugitive. Like all mechanical sources of light it eventually goes out and I am left with a monochromatic wire bas-relief sculpture, which is nice enough, but a bit like a fountain without water.

**M**y frustration with the fragility of this light led me to think about its opposite, the darkness of shadows. My newest works are based on close observation of the shadows that are cast by the body of a figure on to its own body. They are not silhouettes or cartoon-like graphic works that simply highlight areas of high contrast. At times, this way of image-making results in quite abstract patterns but we engage with these works because we all know the patterns of shadow that can be cast by our own bodies—and we have a sense of this even when these patterns are presented to us in abstract forms. Shadows are elusive—as when a cast shadow merges with light reflected from another part of the body—and so these works involve making choices about where it appears absolutes exist. Shadows are also transitory and are impacted by the slightest movement of the subject or viewing position and so I use quick sketches and photographs of my subjects to hold the moment.

The nude is a prominent motif in my work. More than any other subject, the nude signifies “Art.” Sensuality is important. I see sensuality everywhere in the forms of a figure, in cloudscares, and in floral motifs. It is a deep force in humanity and I try to express something of that in my work.

Observing and analyzing the patterns of shadows that the figures cast onto themselves is consistent with the academic approach to drawing that adopted the human figure as the purest form for expressing the highest human ideals and saw drawing an exercise in rationality. The academic method also used a close analysis of the tones and half tones in order to arrive at subtle transitions from light to shadow. However, I am more interested in absolutes than nuances and so in my work I have focused on the areas of total shadow in order to engage more fully with the philosophy of shadows and our perception of absences.

Figures that are almost fully self-shadowed by virtue of being silhouetted against a light source do not convey much in the way of mystery. As a child, I remember being intrigued by the cut-paper silhouette portraits made by a man at the annual Royal Adelaide Show because



**Jonathan Thomson, Nude Shadow 1, 2013,** stencil, 36 x 11 cm (Image).

they offered the subject an unusual view of themselves. Silhouette portraits were more highly regarded in the 18th century when they were used in the study of physiognomy—the belief that character can be read from the face—and in the 19th century when they were used in the pseudoscience of phrenology, which claimed to establish relationships between character and the prominences of the skull.



**Jonathan Thomson, Nude Shadow 13, 2014,** stencil, 38 x 15 cm (Image).

I am more interested in identifying situations in which the shadows impart fragments of information as these offer greater scope to the imagination. For me, the strongest way of representing these fragments of total shadow is within the physical borders of a cut stencil. I make my stencils by drawing onto thin sheet of rigid acrylic and using a die grinder grind to cut away the areas that will later be used to make the impression. Most of these stencils are blocks of solid color separated by the blank areas that represent the areas of the body that are most clearly seen by virtue of being lit. These works can be painted on paper or sprayed graffiti-style onto a wall, but cannot then be translated into freestanding sculpture, as there is nothing to hold the bits together. It is only when the shadow forms linkages between one part of the body and another or when those linkages can be made to a shared base that they can be worked into sculptural forms.

Like the stencils, the sculptures begin as drawings on sheets of rigid acrylic that are then hand cut using a die grinder. Those that work best in terms of the movement they convey or the sensuality of the figure or the element of mystery are then cut from sheets of aluminum. The works begin as flat sheets of aluminum or steel but can also be bent or twisted in order to give the figure more fluidity, poise, composure, or movement in three dimensions. The small-scale maquettes are then used to make the full-size sculpture. These are not simple line drawings in aluminum or steel. They give absence a palpable presence and in this way make connections to a number of key concepts in both Eastern and Western philosophy.

In traditional Chinese painting the concept of negative space or “leaving it blank” is tied to both Taoism and Buddhism. Emptiness is a key Taoist concept. The compilation of Taoist thought by Lao Tze called the *Tao Te Ching* notes that benefit comes from what is there, usefulness from the nothing that is there. Thus the inner space of a jug is its essential part, not the pottery, and that it is the space within four walls that comprises the usefulness of a room. Similarly, in Buddhism, the realization of emptiness is to perceive simultaneously both the ultimate truth and the experiential world. The use of negative space allows artists to allude to a situation in which the visible and invisible, the real and illusory and the past, present and future interact with one another and attain a transcendental harmony. The blankness suggests an infinite space for both the artist’s and the viewer’s imagination. It implies an extension from the marks made by the artist to



Jonathan Thomson, **Shadow Sculpture 19** (Maquette), 2014, Acrylic, 19 x 19.5 x 0.3 cm.



Jonathan Thomson, **Shadow Sculpture 17** (maquette), 2014, acrylic, 21 x 19.5 x 0.3 cm.

all those that he did not and vice versa and by doing so refers to something that is profound but ineffable or invisible.

The practice of Gestalt psychology helps to explain the reasons why our senses sometimes make sense out of incomplete visual information. Sometimes we experience shapes in figures that seem to complete an image even when the shapes do not actually exist. It appears that these additional shapes are supplied by our visual and perceptual apparatus that allows us to form a complete view of something, even when presented with incomplete information. This phenomenon allows us to use our sense of something that does not exist to complete the fragment that does. We literally make something out of nothing.

**T**hus the human figure is the most recognizable shape in nature, even when abstracted by absence and when only its shadows have substance. My sculptures require viewers to look a little more carefully in order to establish what it is that they are looking at and what combination of light source, posture, and body shape gave rise to this particular pattern of shadows. This is a good thing. In a world swamped with images it is good to have some mystery and further readings that reward closer observation. People should want to look at an artwork and to take the time to think about those aspects of life that otherwise go unnoticed and the connections that it makes in their own lives.

Many of these works are derived from the shadows cast by famous classical and neo-classical sculptures. Other works in this series are derived from contemporary models in poses that emulate classic images drawn from art history. There was a time when figurative sculpture was used to celebrate and honor humanity's greatest achievements—from the humanism of the Greeks to the triumphs of the Romans, from the trials and tribulations of Christianity's most important

figures to neoclassical depictions of civic virtues. These are some of the best-loved and most enduring images in the whole of human history. But these days we tend to shy away from presenting representations of people in public. We are quite happy to accept massive advertising hoardings with images of men and women in vari-

ous stages of undress, but almost wholly abstract works dominate our public sculpture. In part, this is because advertising is designed to be temporary while public artwork is generally meant to be permanent, but a more important reason is that public sculpture needs both space and patronage and both of these tend to be the preserve of official or establishment bodies with entrenched attitudes and ideologies.

The abstractions within these works are intelligible as they correspond to the rules of optics. Light travels in straight lines and so the patterns of the shadows are a function of light source, body posture, and body shape. The determining factor in each case is the fact that the shadows are cast onto the body itself and so all of these works are always human shaped—one way or another. The relationships between one graphic component of the work and another are determined by physiology. These relationships maintain their proper proportions irrespective of the scale of the work and do not change from tabletop maquette size to life-size, or plus-size, or monumental size.

Light and shadow constitute a universal duality. Shadows embody darkness and can be associated with secretive things but shadows also have their own poetry and it is this that I want to explore. Shadows are themselves abstract, insubstantial and ephemeral but their presence adds truth to forms. Shadows give a body substance. These sculptures are at once a formal expression of the sculptural language of form, a form of engagement with the conceptual foundations of sculpture and an attempt to use darkness to illuminate truths about society, human existence, and beauty. Δ



**Jonathan Thomson, Shadow Sculpture 12** (maquette), 2014, acrylic, 39.5 x 12 x 0.3 cm.

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