

Out Of The Shadows

Sculptor Peter Tilley's figurative art continues his philosophical enquiry, namely the pursuit of a harmony between life's opposing forces. His addressing of meaningful philosophical concerns through 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.

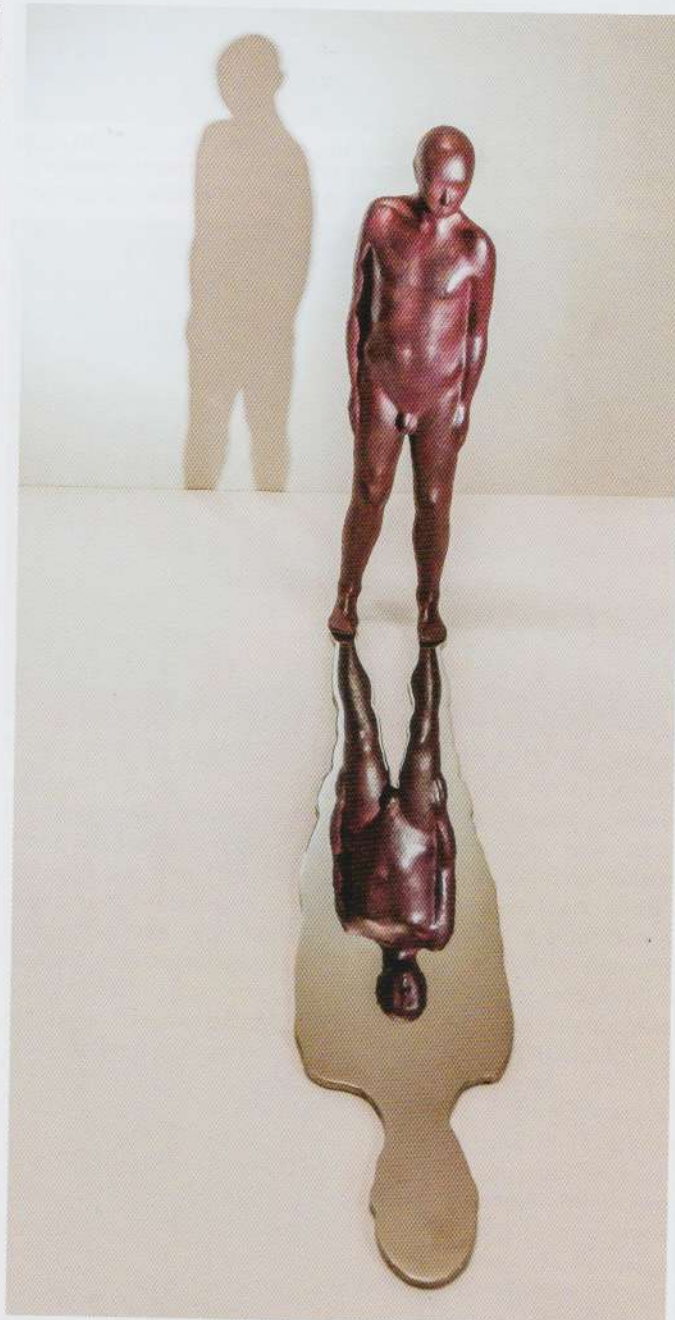
By Victoria Hynes

The optical effects of light and shade have been explored from the first prehistoric cave paintings to our contemporary electronic wizardry. Shadows in Western culture are often associated with sadness and melancholy, mystery and danger. Twentieth-century surrealist painters used the dark silhouette to make dream-like works, while *film noir* directors have used the elongated shadow to add suspense. But there is so much more to shadows as Australian sculptor Peter Tilley's fascination with the symbolic effects shows.

Tilley, from Newcastle, New South Wales, has had more than 30 solo exhibitions. He is also a regular participant in regional gallery exhibitions. His recent academic research and art practice have focused on myriad ways in which the shadow has been used as a subject in Western art and, in particular, its meanings in psychology and philosophy.

Tilley's figurative sculptures and abstract assemblages have always possessed a contemplative edge. From still-life tableaux to freestanding sculptures based around the figure, his complex work evokes many meanings and interpretations. Through working with bronze, steel, and cast iron as well as mixed media, pigments, resin, and found objects, Tilley expresses metaphysical concepts and meanings through the sheer physicality of sculpture.

Born in 1946, in Melbourne, Peter Tilley



Peter Tilley, *Seeing the Shadow*, 2015/2017, patinated cast iron, polished stainless steel, 43 x 78 x 15 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

studied ceramics at Newcastle School of Art and Design in New South Wales, holds an MPhil in fine art from the University of Newcastle, where he is currently completing his PhD. Tilley's compositions are visually restrained yet powerful; calm and ordered but conceptually they pack a punch. Peter Tilley's craftsmanship is fastidious, but the scope of his philosophy is broad. In his rich practice, he draws on humanity's dichotomies: life and death; hope and despair; permanence and decay; the internal and the external, and the figure and the shadow.

In his recent exhibition the theme of the shadow is the common thread that links all the works on display. He uses three-dimensional figurative works and the manifestation of its shadow to explore the fragility of the human condition.

There is a long tradition of realism in the portrayal of the human form in sculpture. As a contemporary figurative sculptor Tilley aims to express the human experience and to provide a critique of what it means to be human today. He uses simple forms to convey layered meanings. His sculpted figures are simplified and generic rather than individualized 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 works with the central sculpted figure appearing pensive or reflective. However, the works evoke too

much of a sense of unease to appear to be quiet or meditative.

Tilley comments on the new series: "The shadows that are used in my three-dimensional works often have a range of meanings; they can represent loss, pain, the unknown, and the dark side of the self or even living in the past. They may represent change, progress, and moving through life. In some instances a particular reading of the shadow may suggest that it is undermining the figure's illusion of certainty. What the shadow implies may disorient or even expose the figure's fallibilities."

Each figure casts a long shadow, which Tilley connects to Jungian psychology and its associations with the unconscious self. Carl Jung stated: "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious."

The symbolism of the shadow in ancient Egyptian funeral sculpture is another underlying theme. The simplicity of form and restrained physical gestures in such sculpture are also evident in Tilley's figures. In Egypt, and other ancient traditions, there was a common belief that

someone's shadow was seen as a person's spirit-double and an outward manifestation of their soul.

Tilley says, "My commitment to representational sculpture follows my understanding that depicting a figure and its shadow are a vehicle that has the capacity to express aspects of the human condition such as the mental state and the soul."

Tilley also draws on Ancient Egyptian notions of duality in his work, such as darkness and light, tenacity and vulnerability, the conscious and unconscious self, life and death, "the reality of opposites as a unifying complimentary order ... illustrating different states within a single entity."

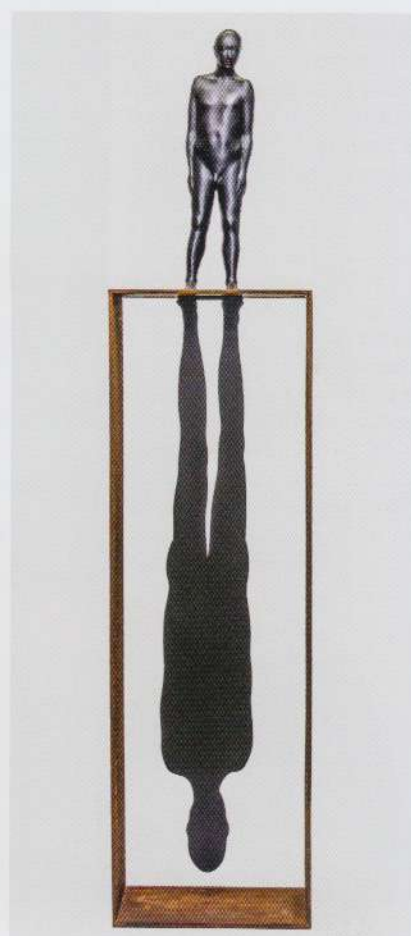
The Greek myth of Narcissus is also explored in works such as *Seeing the Shadow*. In ancient times it was believed that the human soul was contained in a person's reflection. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection and not distinguishing between the real and the illusory, he became consumed by his own image, thereby destroying himself.

Tilley's sculpture draws on this myth but has developed it in response to Jung's theory of the shadow as the dark side of the soul. Tilley uses figurative realism to reveal the underside of human

nature, the parts of ourselves we do not normally reveal to the outside world. In this work, composed of cast iron and stainless steel, the male figure is pictured gazing into its reflection. The reflection is a mirrored silhouette of its own shadow, becoming larger and smaller in relation to the observer's position, revealing both the malleability and elusiveness of the human personality.

In *Follower* the ambiguity between shadow and reflection is again emphasized. He literally replaces what would have been the solitary figure's cast shadow with a mirrored image of its shadow. The work creates optical confusion and a feeling of disquiet in the viewer. The male figure appearing in front of a mirror faces not his reflection but his shadow instead: perhaps forced to confront his dark side, his unconscious self.

Another freestanding work, entitled *The Wandering*, is influenced by early Christian legends of the Jewish people in exile; particularly the 19th century illustrations entitled *The Wandering Jew in a Cemetery* by Gustav Dore (1832–1883). 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.



Above from left: Peter Tilley, *The Wandering*, 2017, patinated cast iron, painted steel, square bar, 146 x 57 x 26 cm. Peter Tilley, *Departing*, 2017–2018, cast iron chair, painted steel, 88.5 x 253 x 62 cm. Peter Tilley, *The Shadow Within*, 2016, cast iron, painted steel, steel, 145 x 32 x 20 cm.



Peter Tilley, **Follower**, 2016, patinated bronze, polished stainless steel, black Perspex, and Corten steel, 58.5 x 46 x 31 cm.

According to Tilley it reflects that 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 color, the shadow indicates that the wandering figure’s journey may be as much spiritual as prosaic. The artist says: “This journey the figure is about to embark upon may be a transition from one place to another, or symbolically from one plane to another, ascent or descent, going from the unknown or darkness to light and enlightenment or vice versa.”

Presence and absence are highlighted in Tilley’s works. “The shadow is a dark spot that confirms an

absence by its very presence,” he says. Tilley draws on the work of Surrealist artists such as Rene Magritte, whose poetic yet mysterious images often featured absent of silhouettes. Like Magritte, Tilley searches for the hidden meaning underlying objects and human figures.

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In *Departing* (2017), 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 raises many interpretations; the presence



Peter Tilley, Dirty Shadow, 2017–2018, painted resin, crushed coal, painted timber, 49 x 68 x 19 cm.

of the shadow is like an imprint of the absent figure’s lost self, the dark side that has been repressed or denied.

Time as a theme is another underlying part of Tilley’s practice. In earlier sculptures, motifs such as clock cases, dials, hands, and watch faces were employed. The materials he uses, too, are likely to be eroded or rusted, suggesting the passage of time. In past works, his use of boats to suggest voyages and journeys also pertains to this theme.

Tilley often imbues his materials 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. Colored pigments in earthy tones are often applied, particularly in his relief works. His use of coal and lead addresses environmental issues associated with these; however, lead is also associated with coffins and reliquaries, symbolizing mortality and the passage of time. In *Dirty Shadow*, the figure casts a

shadow made of coal fragments; symbolizing both the ‘dirty’ environmental impact of coal due to human use and the negative side of our personalities.

Tilley additionally has a penchant for found objects, such as ceramic fragments and bird bones found in the sand dunes of the mid-north coast of New South Wales. In *Undiscovered Self* (2017), 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 unaware of it. Yet the delicate bones are hollow; they appear without substance. Tilley appears to allude to the idea that many

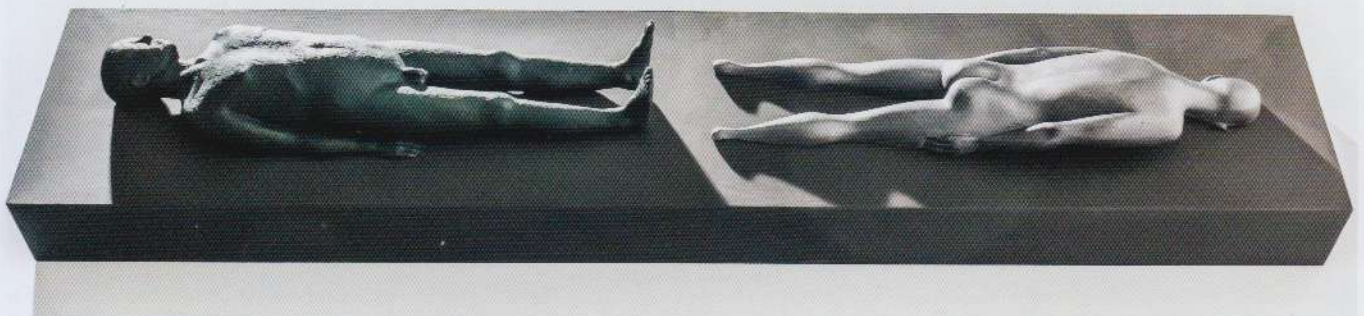
of our concealed troubling thoughts are often inconsequential, if only we have the courage to face them.

Using the figure and the shadow to present human presence and absence, Peter Tilley continues his philosophical enquiry, namely the pursuit of a harmony between life’s opposing forces. The fact that he is addressing such meaningful 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. Δ

Note:

Peter Tilley, *Seeing the Shadow*, was on display in Australia at The University Gallery, The University of Newcastle, NSW, from March 21 to April 14, 2018 and at May Space Gallery, Sydney, from April 18 to May 12, 2018.

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Peter Tilley, Shadow Half, 2016, painted resin, graphite and resin, painted timber, 13 x 99 x 19.5 cm.