

***Richard: an installation by Nick Grellier and Anna Cady, Chapels of Rest, Stroud 2024***

*Richard* was made originally for installation in the southern Chapel of Rest in Stroud cemetery, a suitably cold, damp and dimly lit place of remembrance, and of claustrophobic containment. The starting point for the work was a suitcase passed on to Nick by her late grandmother as a bequest. The suitcase contained various things belonging to her uncle, Richard, who was killed in a motor accident in 1961.

In the years following this tragedy Richard's devastated mother had visited spiritualist mediums in order to speak to him. Notes from these encounters were included in the suitcase, along with a letter to Richard, written on the anniversary of his death. In *Richard Darling* we can read the letter as it is handled, reread, folded and placed in an envelope that is addressed to Richard. The letter refers to a conversation between Richard and his mother that took place recently, presumably through the medium of the séance, "oh what a wonderful achievement". The tone of the letter is conversational, loving, hopeful perhaps, but full of tender remorse and sadness.

Also included was a note:

*All of these things belonged to Richard. I have cherished them – please you who handle them after me do the same. The yellow sweater and the ties may be taken and used if liked. His Mother.*

The suitcase is a rich legacy. In making this work the artists have sensitively honoured the request to cherish this repository of memory. The enigmatic, more or less random, collection of objects is certainly central to the installation. Richard is memorialised in the title of the piece and in the granular detail of the storytelling, but, in working outwards from this highly specific instance, Nick and Anna have made something that powerfully provokes a more generalised meditation on grief, family and the passing on of the obligation/compulsion to remember, to cherish an inherited memory, unexplained, half understood, a mystery that becomes part of our familial identity.

*Richard* consists of a series of video projections, in a site specific installation, with the inherited suitcase as a focal point. In *Tying*, the repeated action of tying the inherited collection of ties is projected from above, onto the suitcase, which sits open on a table. The tie is a slightly unfashionable garment today, but in 1961 the putting on of a tie would have been an everyday action. Here the acting out of tying the knot is unfamiliar and absurd, clumsily, comically anachronistic, but it also suggests a ritual re-enactment or recreation of a forgotten daily sacrament – an action that anchors us in this world, a metaphor perhaps for the ties that bind...

In *Unravelling*, a ball of yellow wool is projected onto the floor of an antechamber to the chapel. The ball is gently unravelling. Adjacent to this, visually connected, though in the main space, *The Other Side* is projected onto the rough wall of the chapel. We see two identical faces side by side, identifiable as Nick, cut off below the eyes so only the lower half is showing. In one we see the unravelled strand of wool spooling out of the mouth, whilst in

the other the wool is consumed, drawn smoothly into the mouth. The effect is created by the filmed actions being run in reverse. The image is visceral, evoking sensation. Whilst the drawing in of the wool is taut and smooth, the drawing out is a more laboured, crooked, affair. The wool is an exact match for the yellow sweater that was part of the contents of the suitcase.

What is being explored here? The title suggests a reference to the esoteric language of the séance, attempts to assuage the longing to speak again with the beloved departed. The jumper that is a concrete manifestation of the absent body here takes on the form of a sort of ectoplasmic exhalation - the attenuated thread of ancestral connection. But it also seems to speak to the family vernacular, taken in with our mother's milk and regurgitated in the form of idiosyncratic language, stories and sayings that are passed on from generation to generation. Through repetition the language and stories become embodied, part of who we are as individuals, but also part of the commonwealth of tribal belonging – they place us. The sense of reiteration is emphasised by the film being shown on a loop, the thread of kinship is endlessly ingested and disgorged as imperfect memory, embellished, reanimated and subtly altered by time.

The partially shown faces float over an entirely black background. This gives the revealed features a particular emphasis. Along with the voice and the language of family there are the fleeting resemblances that mark us as belonging, "something about the mouth... the expression..." Can we see the ghost of Richard playing out across Nick's face?

I was once at a family funeral when an elderly woman that I didn't recognise approached me. She looked at me closely and asked me who I was. She told me that I was the very image of my maternal grandfather – her cousin, who had died more than 50 years previously, before I was born. She said that there wasn't a day went by when she didn't think of him. I realised that she was crying. Something in my face had momentarily brought the long dead William back to life for her, stirring her emotions.

Resemblance also seems to play a part in *Sitting*. An old armchair is placed before another projection showing the lower half of Nick's face against the same black background seen in *The Other Side*. A woman, voiced by Anna, is speaking: an apparent stream of consciousness, random thoughts that carry a clear impression of grief. At intervals, another, masculine, voice interjects the word "Mother". The word appears to be spoken by Nick in the projection, though there is an uncanny incongruity between face and voice. We are invited to sit, and find that the voices are emanating from speakers embedded in the wings of the armchair. The effect is to create a sense of intimacy in which the woman's voice and our own thoughts become intermingled. Like the yellow jumper, the empty chair becomes a symbol of absence. When we occupy an unfamiliar armchair we have the uncanny feeling of occupying the absent body. The old armchair is a commonplace trope of the aged relation. Perhaps we can all call to mind a particular example. In his later years my own decrepit father would spend his days in an armchair, his vitality stolen by

a series of strokes, dismayed at his fate. After his death the chair was redolent of his decline, an object laden with symbolism and memory, shabby and stained, the contents of his pockets lost down the sides.

The intermittent “Mother” is spoken with varied emphasis, sometimes assertive, sharp, soft, pleading. Is this the voice of Richard, channelled through the medium, or perhaps through Nick’s genetic/cultivated inheritance? The woman’s voice unspools, a disordered narrative that is nevertheless anchored by references to objects and events related to Richard’s death and the handed down suitcase. There is a kind of authenticity to the voice here that evoked real thought and memory, which are never linear and systematic. In a similar way, the experience of loss is never simple, cannot be reduced. It is a truism that the greatest tragedy is often experienced as farce. Here, the absurd, the ingenuous and the humorous (the candle that refuses to be extinguished) accompanies the unimaginable sadness of outliving one’s child.

This quality of authenticity is key to the success of *Richard* as a work of art. In all its detail it has the ring of truth. I was reminded of Joseph Conrad’s statement about the job of the artist,

*My task, which I am trying to achieve is ... to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see. That — and no more, and it is everything.*

In re-imagining with such exactitude not so much the long dead Richard as the grief of his mother, Nick and Anna have lifted that grief out of the particular and placed it vividly in a shared world that we can all recognise. It often seems to me that the most affecting art works, like *Richard*, elicit a shock of connection — not because they hold up a mirror, but because they reveal a shared truth. Generic representations of sorrow cannot carry this charge. Without diminishing the singular depth of individual feeling, or the peculiarity of specific events, bereavement, like birth, is part of our commonwealth. The experience of it may turn us in on ourselves, but it can also extend our sense of being part of the human race.

Whilst looking at *Richard*, I was also thinking about a favourite line from Alan Bennett, that every English family has a secret, and the secret is that it's not like other families. Nick and Anna remind us that it is in our very weirdness that we recognise each other.