

TUNNEL VISION | ARTISTS STATEMENT

Tunnel vision is the loss of peripheral perception with retention of central sight, resulting in a constricted circular tunnel-like field of vision. Goggles, glasses, and binoculars as well as medical illnesses are physical causes. For me, morning sickness felt like tunnel vision, everything apart from what I was directly looking at felt sickly. Painting through this lens was focusing and challenging. Psychologically, tunnel vision is when individuals focus on cues that are consistent with their opinion and filter out cues that are inconsistent with their viewpoint. This obsessive focus, where everything else falls away, is a mindset of funneling that is useful in the studio.

The violent comedy in Looney Tunes Cartoons', *Road Runner*, presents the painted tunnel as one of Wile E. Coyote's stunts performed to trick the Road Runner. In the episode, 'Fast and Furry-Ous'¹, Coyote paints a tunnel at speed onto a terracotta rock, an instant optical illusion. Starting with an ultramarine semicircle, two shades of grey, a lighter shade in an acute semicircle for the entrance and a darker for 'inside', with a turquoise blue 'exit', Coyote gives the illusion of an open tunnel then lays in wait for the Runner. To Coyote's chagrin, Road Runner ploughs on through the imaginary tunnel, confounding Coyote, who then takes a run up to the painted tunnel and smacks hard into the rock face, bouncing off, dazed and comedically crumpled like an accordion.

In March 2016, Yahoo News reported that a street artist had recreated Wile E. Coyote's fake painted tunnel from an episode of the cartoon *Road Runner* so successfully that a Fiat drove into the wall on which it was painted.

Recreating Coyote's tunnel in the studio to better understand it, I was stunned at how loony the simple process was in real life, and how effective the imitation. The numerous tones of blues and greys needed made me laugh; it was like cracking a code to make a puzzle. It is a precise and measured exercise of masking areas and meeting edges that boil down depth, space, and time. I appreciated that taking on 'tunnel vision' could be a way out of my stuckness following completion of a large labour-intensive work. Faced with an empty studio again, the idea of tunnel vision could become an escape route for me, like Road Runner.

As a kid, as is ubiquitous, I remember collecting empty toilet rolls to build things with. These redundant tubes, once heavily cello-taped and connected could morph into limb augmentations, eye extenders and view finders, often becoming absurd glasses or rudimentary telescopes. Attaching them to eyes or mouth, sound could be carried further, and it seemed sight could be supplemented. I rehearsed this in the studio with two sawn off tubular poles I had found. I felt like a horse wearing blinders in traffic, fixed and dangerous, externally oblivious. The field of vision could be concentrated, restricted, and broadened. In Tom and Jerry's *Holed Up* the hole presents the tunnel to the 'other' side from both sides, Tom outside it and Jerry in. Tunnels in cartoons offer a duality- a place of escape and of emergence - and a punctuation mark, a pause in the action/motion. The visual cue of a tunnel presents an opening towards potential, unknown and uncertain ends. An escape and a trap. This is a game where stealth, surprise and slapstick collude. Masaccio² deploys similar techniques, deftly using them to frame the painting's focus and make windows out of the painting³. In Francis Bacon's painting *Figure in a Landscape* (1945), the body is headless, set against the landscape so that the void where the head should be becomes a tunnel through the scene and into the body. Bacon's body tunnels are a way to cast outside of themselves, to connect through and to project from. They offer us, 'A violent comedy where the architecture of the tunnel becomes prosthesis, extending and limiting⁴.

We assume the tunnel space as one of transition, a space to move through from A to B. The anatomy of the body is full of tunnels, from the vascular system to the spinal canal. The functions that journey in

¹ Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zg2Cs851SwM>

² The Italian Renaissance painter known for his painted architectural structures

³ The Library of Masters Book: Masaccio. Ornella Casazza. Scala 1990.

⁴ John Welford. Medium.com. May 12th.

these spaces are complex. We are often only aware of them when something stops working as it should. In pregnancy, over half of women suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome, when the median nerve, which passes through the narrow passage in the wrist, is compressed. When breastfeeding through the night, I found myself staring relentlessly into my baby's ear, into the deep, silent, velvet space that was a mystery. Tunnelling inside him as he sucked on me connected us to each other and took me down into his little body, to consider the labyrinth of his inner systems and processes.

There is a level of exhaustion which demands a tunnelling inside of oneself; the hidden depths are excruciating and hilarious. Tunneling into oneself can offer insight, a sense of safety and isolation. I found myself remembering a holiday in the Outer Hebrides before he was born where I had watched peat cutters delve into the turf and hefting, turning, and laying out wedges of the inner soil in neat rows along the cleft they had cut into. They tunneled into the earth and laid out its damp inner parts in tidy layers like sedimentary rock, each layer a slightly different tone of brown black. After the birth I saw an osteopath who described connecting me back together in slices, like a landscape that had become dislocated.

In the opening sequence from Kevin Breathnach's genre bending book, *Tunnel Vision*, describing the famous Norwegian film, *Train ride Bergen to Oslo 2009*⁵ a 7-hour train journey shot singularly in train view, he is licensed to let his mind drift as the train passes through innumerable tunnels. The effect is like being trapped in an overheated room⁶. The form of this book enforces the essence of its title in a shifting of essay, personal experience, and poetry. Having a baby is like getting on a train and realising you can't get off.

'A speck of light is showing so the danger must be growing'⁷, sings the little mouse in one Tom and Jerry episode as they enter a tunnel. The visuals become psychedelic and mad. It is a portal where the pitch changes. What if a tunnel is a place to go to DO something: Take a pee, sleep under, shelter from, have sex in, graffiti, fight, kill someone?⁸ The very nature of tunnels present a territory for 'underground' activities, a space for transgression, and moreover a place that's shady, weirdly lit, and where the rest of society is not paying attention. The harsh nature of bare concrete and strobe lighting creates an unsettling energy. What if one doesn't come out? What if the tunnel collapses or you get to the other side only to be in a foreign zone? As my pregnancy progressed, I began to think of going to meet the baby, imagining walking through a long tunnel to retrieve him, and emerging out of the other side. As the date drew closer, I realised that of course, he must move through the tunnel towards me.

Tunnel boring machines, otherwise known as 'moles' are used to dig today's tunnels. The Channel Tunnel was created using two of these machines, each burrow from one side of the channel towards one another. They are long cylindrical instruments, with a cutting face that shunts into the earth incrementally. It has an internal conveyor belt to take the slurry out and an efficient hydrologic system to insert the rings of concrete that will become the tunnel. Most tunnels are given female names. The largest one in the world is called Bertha. Each TBM is designed for one specific project and at the end of the task, they bury themselves. When the two channel tunnel TBMs met they each diverted, boring into the ground and extinguishing themselves as at that point they were redundant. A tragic romance. Post-Brexit, the Channel Tunnel has been heralded as 'a beacon of idealism'⁹. There are deeper and longer tunnels, but none have the aura of digging under an international waterway to link two sovereign nations. The audacity of the idea and the realisation of this conceptual leap was groundbreaking. The Channel Tunnel was a symbol of monumental engineering prowess. It was a piece of long-term thinking that put aside political expediency for the future benefit of citizens. This tunnel now offers both projections into possible (more connected) futures and a nostalgic looking back.

⁵ produced by the Norwegian broadcasting corporations coach station NRK2.

⁶ Tunnel Vision'. Kevin Breathnach

⁷ Extract from Roald Dahl's 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory used in the tunnel episode of Tom and Jerry.

⁸ Following a conversation with a Bermondsey resident about Millwall fans fighting to the death in the tunnel there.

⁹ Frieze article. <https://www.frieze.com/article/britains-physical-connection-europe-channel-tunnel>

24 weeks pregnant, on a hike on Dartmoor we rounded the last Tor, encountering as we did five or six wild ponies, two of which were laid on their sides breathing heavily. At first, we thought they were dying but after a few minutes, watching at a distance, we realised they were in labour. They made no sound. The other ponies were positioned like sentries up the mountainside, keeping guard, vigilant and attendant. We had stumbled into a ceremony. A friend told me that there is a high chance the ponies will die while giving birth. It is thought they enter a 'passing over' state, a transition towards death and through it, out the other side.

At 42 weeks and 2 days, I was induced. As the Labour progressed, I became obsessed and fixated on a hole in the wall, left by a nail that must have once been there to hold up a painting or similar. I focused on this void to tunnel into mentally, channelling all my pain, sound and feeling into and through it in a deep excavation that met the escalation of the dilation process. Without deviation or distraction time lost significance. Tunnelling is a way to cross terrain or boundaries that could not normally be crossed. Recently, my baby has taken to inserting his fingers into my mouth when he eats, feeling my mouth 'tunnel' whilst he experiences his own tunnel as food is chewed, sucked, and swallowed. This hand/mouth insertion is Winnicott's notion of mutuality: when the baby recognises that the mother is doing something for them, and they have the desire to give something back in return. But there is also something claustrophobic about being attached to another body. Can the body escape itself?¹⁰ But there is light at the end of the tunnel. Ejection emphasises propulsion and rarely do we look back. Road Because of his belief in the conceit, Road Runner ploughs through the tunnel, with momentum and lack of anxiety. The tunnel offers freedom to Road Runner, and freedom takes us to a fresh landscape, offering us an alternative illusion to run into headfirst.

*Writing edited from research, writing and diaries made over the time creating the paintings in the studio.
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¹⁰ Paraphrased from Francis Bacon, 'the logic of sensation'. Giles Deleuze. Chapter 3. Athleticism.