

Heliotrope

Steven Bode

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The sun has two faces. Source of heat, light and inspiration, object of mystical veneration, sign of creativity, vitality and power, it hovers majestically above us — the ultimate symbol of life on the planet, and most of the things that make it worth living. It also has its dark side, however. From childhood, we learn not to look at it too long or too closely, and as we grow older we become increasingly worried about the harmful effects of its rays. Too much sun, it has long been maintained, can ravage the body and unhinge the mind. It is a strange paradox: the sun which stands at the epicentre of so many of our rationalist attempts to order and measure the world around us is the same sun which feeds a much more primitive, irrational urge — exotic, voluptuous, pagan; leading us into temptation, edging us on towards madness and destruction.

Clive Gillman's interactive installation 'Heliotrope' takes its title from the heliotrope flower (*heliotropium arborescens*), a plant indigenous to Europe and North Africa, named after its tendency to follow the sun. Just as the heliotrope itself has its roots in ancient legend (in Greek myth it is the embodiment of Clytie, who was turned into a flower and forever watches her lover Apollo moving through the heavens), Gillman's lucid and beguiling installation strikes a similar mythopoeic chord, combining iconic elemental imagery with a series of short but reverberant quotations from the French/Algerian writer, Albert Camus. In many ways, the whole piece turns on this intimate interplay between image and text, between the natural landscape and our attempts to reflect it, and rationalise it, in language. In each of the four discrete sections of the work, an evocative, emblematic image (of falling blossom, of an almond nut, of a bloodstone and of the heliotrope flower) provides the visual accompaniment to a quote from Camus, which is spoken aloud and picked out in flashes of light from a grid of text displayed on a large projection screen.

The meaning of each quote is revealed according to the extent to which each viewer interacts with a number of computer-based image sequences housed on a monitor located in front of the screen. As the viewer moves through each part of the work in turn (catching the blossom, and blowing it back into the void; cracking the almond; or plucking the petals of the heliotrope flower) an image of the sun rises behind them on

another large projection screen, casting its glow over the gallery space — echoing the way in which each quicksilver glimmer of light illuminates an individual word on the text-puzzle of the facing screen. The image of the sun acts as a kind of timer, allowing the viewer to orient themselves spatially and temporally in the arc of the work, before returning the gallery to darkness as the final sequence comes to a close.

The image of the sun to which Gillman's 'Heliotrope' is drawn to is very much a sun seen from a Northern European perspective. In Anglo-Saxon cultures, our experience of the sun is tempered by its absence — away from the intensity of the solar glare, we both desire it and regard it with suspicion. This ambivalent attitude toward the power of the sun is elegantly captured in Camus' writing and also, to an extent, in his persona — although he has come to be regarded as an exemplar of a typically Parisian intellectual cool, Camus was profoundly marked by, and nostalgic for, his early years in French North Africa. Underneath his urbane, often austere exterior lay the background and the temperament of an archetypal *homme du midi* — earthy, volatile, passionate; hearkening back to a true and pure existence "in the confused music of the heat and the sun." The sun casts a captivating spell over early essays like 'Summer in Algiers': vividly illuminating the detail of everyday Algerian life, flooding the page with a bitter-sweet lyricism and sensuality. It also exerts a darker fascination in the novels which made Camus' name — in 'The Outsider' it is the fierce light and heat of the sun pressing down on his brain which impels Meursault to commit his fateful, arbitrary, existential act.

The Northern European artist or writer invariably approaches the sun from a more oblique and self-conscious angle. Although a long line of painters and novelists (van Gogh, Shelley, Conrad) have celebrated the colours and contours of the Southern landscape (or extolled the simpler pleasures and virtues of Mediterranean life), the Northern visitor to the South is more often than not cast in the role of the outsider, looking in on an apparently charmed and idyllic world. Chasing the sun can offer a respite from the Northern winter, or an escape from the inhibitions and sobrieties of the Northern mind, but chasing the sun can also seem like chasing an illusion — that it is possible to return to a more natural and authentic life.

'Heliotrope' lines up alongside a number of Gillman's earlier interactive art works in combining an intricate intellectual explication with something very close to its opposite. In installations like 'To Be This Good... Rock of Ages' or in CD-Rom works like 'Advent', the revelatory power of madness, the intuitive insights of children or the epiphanies and superstitions of folk wisdom are contrasted with the increasingly

remote and self-referential abstractions of the modern technological world. In each of these intriguing game-like pieces, the exercise of logic and rational argument, significantly, only ever takes one so far; there is always some 'other' order of meaning that remains tantalisingly out of reach.

The same claim could, perhaps, be made for Gillman's attitude towards the digital technology he employs in his work: while 'Heliotrope' is as polished and arresting as the most sophisticated of contemporary multimedia works, it is haunted, at all times, by the knowledge that even the most life-like replication or simulation of reality can never truly capture the nature of the thing-in-itself. While it vividly communicates the feeling of awe we experience in our encounters with the elemental forces of the world, it is equally imbued by the sense of melancholy that so often arises when we try (and fail) to fully represent them in an image or in words. Delicate, affecting and atmospheric, 'Heliotrope' is another impressive achievement from an artist whose work has long been deserving of significantly more recognition than it has received up till now. If it does nothing else, the elegance and the poetry of 'Heliotrope' should inch this most subtle and understated of artists a little bit further into the light.