

**FVU Director Steven Bode responds to A K Dolven's *it could happen to you*, originally written at the time of the FVU commission in 2001.**

The Norwegian artist Anne Katrine Dolven has only been working with video for a little over four years but in that time has attracted considerable attention for her coolly composed and evocative imagery (Dolven began and still works as a painter) and for the fresh twist these videos bring to classical forms like the landscape and the still life. A recent series of video portraits, based on paintings by Norway's early-modernist master Edvard Munch, exerts an equal fascination — not least because of Munch's exalted standing, not just in Norway but within a wider art-historical pantheon. Dolven is acutely aware of this, of course, and her treatment of these canonical works inclines as much towards *hommage* as deconstruction. In each of her five separate video pieces, Dolven sticks respectfully close to the outline of the original - replicating its play of colour, emulating its framing and composition - while introducing new visual elements that provide a more contemporary resonance.

The video 'puberty' (2000) typifies Dolven's approach. The painting it draws from, dating from 1894, is one of Munch's most enduring images, a compelling study of a naked adolescent girl, poised uncomfortably between childish innocence and rapidly-approaching womanhood. In Dolven's video, Munch's gauche and fretful sitter, pinned like a butterfly at the edge of her bed, tremulous at the onset of sexual awakening, is reincarnated in the guise of a modern teenager listening to music on her Walkman in her bedroom. She, too, is naked, and adopts an identical pose, yet there is a world of difference in demeanour and attitude. Though the fact that we are now observing her on video might be expected to heighten the sense of voyeurism and intrusion, the time we spend with her - watching her absently-mindedly drumming her finger, noting her easy confidence in her nakedness - restores a self-possession that is absent from the startled figure in the painting, and lends a warmth and a humanity to an image which, over the intervening hundred years, has, in truth, become something of a cipher.

Munch's 'Self Portrait with Cigarette' (1895) is a comparatively lesser-known work, although half-familiar as a representative example of a particular sub-genre of portrait painting that was highly popular at the turn of the century. Shrouded in smoke, self-assertive and a little self-important, Munch contemplates his art work - himself - with quiet satisfaction. In her video, 'portrait with cigarette' (2000), Dolven interposes another young woman, whose sullen stare at the camera barely relents in the six-and-a-half minutes that it takes for her cigarette to burn down to ash. She radiates nothing of the

cocksure composure of her artist-mentor, and spends the time fidgeting with her remote-control handset, switching channels or cranking up the volume, as she looks for something to distract her, or to hold her attention. Restless and irritable, she seems the total opposite of her counterpart in 'Puberty'.

'The Kiss' (1897) is one of Munch's most celebrated paintings: an unforgettable image of two lovers dissolving into one another; a vivid emblem of the thrilling (and sometimes threatening) loss-of-self that is forged in the heat of sexual desire. In her video, 'The Kiss' (2000), Dolven films a young couple in the selfsame clinch, and sets their avid, slowburning embrace to the steady throb of a nightclub beat. The flaring, over-exposed colours, while echoing the red motif of the painting, induce a kind of chemically-altered mood, heightened by the insistent, repeating patterns of the trance-like House music. Throughout all this, the figures hardly move, so wrapped up are they in each other. One supposes that this must be love — or at least the impassioned, romantic ecstasy of Munch's first kiss. Then again, judging by the small-hours warehouse setting, the blurring of bodily boundaries might just as easily be the product of ecstasy's chemical derivative.

'it could happen to you' (2001), alludes, in part, to another iconic Munch painting, 'The Sick Child' (1896). Here, too, Dolven reverses the symbolism of the original, raising Munch's flame-haired girl from her sick-bed and placing her at the bedside of an apparently ailing older man. A complex study in nuance and ambivalence, 'it could happen to you' stands apart from the other video portraits (and from much of the rest of Dolven's work) in the way that its preoccupation with significant details invites a wider narrative reading. 'portrait with cigarette' 'puberty', and 'The Kiss' all have the unchanging stature of tableaux, fixed on a moment when time (whether through boredom, bliss or self-absorption) gives the impression of standing still. In 'it could happen to you', time, whilst not exactly racing, moves forward inexorably toward some kind of immanent *denouement*.

'it could happen to you' is a micro-drama in four acts. A man and a (younger) woman lie on a bed — he, under the covers; she, with her tousled flame of hair and her fashionable boots and clothes, on top of the plain, white sheets. Her actions towards him seem tender and consoling; what's less clear is whether she is ministering to him in illness, or attempting to soften an emotional hurt that she might herself have caused. (The sight of her high-heeled boots against the bed-cover, while asserting her impetuous bohemian spirit, suggests that her presence here may be only temporary.) Her overtures meet with little response — although whether this is because the man is at the end of his strength or the limit of his patience is hard to tell: the moment

when she reaches for his hand, only for it fall, limply, from her grasp, can be read in either way.

The complexion of the whole scene changes, however, when the man, summoning his energy or swallowing his pride, twists across the pillow, and, in an image of ghastly vulnerability, searches for her blindly with his mouth. It is her turn now to fail to reciprocate — instead, she lowers her head, so that his lips brush lightly across her hair. Is she rebuffing him, or is it more that she is simply unable to cope with the anguish of these dying moments? The film's final twist, when she runs a finger provocatively over his mouth, only heightens this underlying *frisson* of ambiguity. As she withdraws her finger with a vampish flourish, is she making it clear that she is cruelly dismissing him, or leaving him with an image of a sexual heat that is no longer possible for the two of them to rekindle? Which do we want it to be: death scene or love scene? Even after several repeat plays, there is no definitive answer; only further confirmation that the intimacies of love and the sorrows of loss are profoundly and inextricably linked.

In the gallery, the piece unfolds in a narrow, self-contained room, with the other video portraits occupying their own discrete spaces. Just as the murmur of traffic, and the muted thud of nearby music, intrude on the intensely private affair, these other personae lurk at its margins, adding their own subtle inflections (is the girl with the cigarette a jealous antagonist?; who exactly are the lovers sharing the passionate kiss?) or simply connecting this highly personal but everyday drama with the endless cycle of human events. A girl retreats to her own secret universe; another is bored to distraction; two people kiss as if they want that moment never to end. Life goes on: oblivious, indifferent.

Such speculative connections are further encouraged by a new piece, 'Headlights' (2001), which, again, has its origins in Munch, in the form of a wood-cut called 'Into the Forest'. It is night, and a car has been parked at the side of an isolated road, its headlights scything a path through the darkness towards the outline of a nearby wood. A man and a woman (the man clothed, the woman naked) stand full-square in the beam of light, then walk off together, in serene but sinister lockstep, before disappearing into the void. The piece has the haunting, indelible imprint of a dream-image, simultaneously arousing and disturbing. The penetrating glare of the headlights evokes the strange phallic moonglow that hovers in the background of a number of paintings such as 'Moonlight' (1895), while the pale gleam of the woman's body, visible long after the man's has vanished, suggests a devouring vampiric sexuality that all-too-regularly surfaces in

Munch's representations of women. Once again, we are left to ponder its relation to the protagonists of Dolven's other portrait works. Is this the same man and woman as in 'it could happen to you'? Does it detail an erotic episode from their past? Is it a memory, or a fantasy, of an assignation with another partner (an unknown man; or the resentful young woman in 'portrait with cigarette' perhaps)? Is the fantasy solely erotic, or does it have darker and more pathological undertones?

Munch's paintings run the gamut of the big existential themes, spotlighting the lonely human figure against a looming backdrop of dread and uncertainty, haunted by the demons of anxiety, sex and death. Products of a turbulent *fin-de-siècle* imagination, they reverberate into the present with all the power and intensity of archetypes. Anne Katrine Dolven's video portraits retain the elemental force of Munch's original images, while opening them to new insights, particularly in their portrayal of women. They, too, are located in an ambiguous and unsettling universe, where identity is confusing and parlous, where anything can happen to anyone at any given moment. In Dolven's hands, though, this state of existential uncertainty, far from always being an occasion for angst, throws out a glimmer of a new sense of possibility.