

## Perceptions/Misconceptions

### S H E L L S

Written by Charlotte Bradley

*“For what is beyond our shell? What lurks beyond our boundaries?”*

A spot lit pram spills across the gallery floor as a ruminative voice narrates the beginning of James Paddock’s exhibition *‘Shells’*, “Once you were seen as unusual, merely different”. Glowing from the darkness either side of the pram are two video installations, and the artist’s testimonial to the realities of mental health in contemporary society.

*“You were born with a shell and will always live within shells”*

Using the analogy of shells to address the many faces of our physical, mental, and digital realities, Paddock’s work humbly breaks down ideas of the self, dismantles the ego, and furtively acknowledges the fragility of the mind. The first installation, *‘Blinds’*, is a poetic documentation of a conversation between young and old, examining our social, psychological, and intellectual boundaries as human beings. The film frames a difference between generations, as both characters call to question the realities of then and now, and come to recognise how neither past nor future realities have been, or will ever be, perfect. As the pair walk down a winding path, travel through an indefinable forest, and conclude their reflections on a bridge, we are led to believe the journey for a perfect shell is endless. As we watch the video flicker on the surface of Venetian blinds, the fragmented image alone becomes a visual metaphor for our own “imperfect perceptions”.

Across from this and towering above the fallen pram, is the installation *‘Nets’*. A slow video projection offers a looped tide of famous faces, acclaimed for their achievements yet their afflictions left unbeknown to the public. As the voice-over speculates, “We don’t know who we may deny in this life”. A wave of guilt fills the room as each portrait stares back from the suspended net curtain. And yet, in conjunction with *‘Blinds’*, the work becomes the first step towards celebration; it is tribute to the shells that comprise our individuality. As discussed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, there was a time when those with mental health issues were regarded as ‘different’ and thought to possess a form of wisdom, rather than the modern approach of either medicalisation or institutionalisation. Paddock’s work addresses this, as the faceless narrator of *‘Nets’* demands, “Let this child speak. Who could this person be?” Through a sanctum of old faces, new beliefs and a readiness for acceptance are born.

*“What now?”*

The digitalisation of *Shells* is quietly reminiscent of the work by the American video artist Doug Aitkin, hypnotising an audience through the immersive aesthetic of moving image. As part of his overall artistic practice, Paddock exploits the medium to approach social topics he believes are overlooked and under-represented: his work often critiquing and conversing with contemporary society through his aestheticised observations. In light of how Foucault examined the past to both inform and improve the future, the artist’s work is not another bid for mental health awareness, but instead becomes a promotion of how we should tolerate rather than cure. We must return to our primal instincts. With this, viewers of the installation are cradled in a dark room as the glow of the projectors and the counsel of paternal narratives provide a safe space to embrace Paddock’s message, and arguably, start again. The installation becomes a place of rebirth, a space for realisation, and a cause for humble celebration.