

Kerry Tribe's Dead Star Light exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre

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A man's voice echoes around a large white room, two black lines run round the walls, and a smaller room in the centre blocks your view of the opposite wall. How could this be relevant in an exhibit about memory?

But then you turn your head and see the most unexpected set-up; recording equipment and an oscilloscope standing on a plain wooden box. If you follow the black lines around the room, you discover an identical set-up in the opposite corner.

When you get closer, you notice that the two black lines on the wall are actually reels of tape, and that the man's voice you can hear is part of the exhibit.

"In May 1957, American pilot Milton Torres saw a ghost (and received top-secret orders to shoot it down) while serving in Britain," said the Camden Arts Centre file, and that is the voice you hear; Milton Torres recounting the details of his mission after it was declassified in 2008.

The "ghost" was actually an aircraft that disappeared from radar as soon as Torres got close enough to destroy it. The unknown craft was dubbed a UFO. But the details of the mission are not the focus of the exhibit. It is the remembering that is important.

Torres' pauses and hesitations show that he is trying to remember, but the movement of the oscilloscope draws the viewer's eyes and the steady tone of his voice takes over. Your concentration slips, and you struggle to focus on what Torres is actually saying. Is he repeating himself or is his story just very long?

The odd set-up is part of Dead Star Light, the first British exhibition by American artist Kerry Tribe, which opened at the Camden Arts Centre last week.

The exhibition features three works: Milton Torres Sees a Ghost, Parnassius Mnemosyne and The Last Soviet. Each work explores the idea of memory and forgetting, using different technology (reel-to-reel audio, 16mm film and video) to engage the viewers' senses and challenge their own ability to remember.

"The works relate to questions of personal and historical memory. Her [Kerry Tribe's] projects form an on-going investigation into memory, subjectivity and doubt," said the Camden Arts Centre.

When you move into the smaller room in the centre of the gallery, your audio senses are instantly numbed, and suddenly it is your sight that is engaged.

The only light in the black room comes from the gap in the wall which serves as a door. It is empty except for an old-fashioned projector and screen. The image on the screen is actually a butterfly's wing, seen under a microscope. But if you didn't know this before you entered, it would be almost impossible to guess.

Blurred black and white shapes ripple and shift across the screen, against a black background. The only sound is the projector, and your ears automatically block it out. Your eyes are fixed on the screen, the only movement in the black room, and you try to remember the pattern. Is it repeating, or are you are just imagining that it is?



"It's hypnotising," said one visitor to the centre, "It draws you in, and it's disconcerting."

When you leave the room, you blink your eyes a few times and your ears suddenly remember to hear, as though you are waking up.

The final part of the exhibition is The Last Soviet, a repeating video describing the mission of two Russian cosmonauts who were in space when the USSR collapsed in 1991. You're not sure at what point in the film you entered, but you watch anyway and quickly realise it's as confusing and engaging as the previous two works.

The voice-over switches between a woman speaking Russian and man speaking English; opposite people sharing the same memory. Blurred and overlapping images cross the screen, showing everything from leaves floating inside a space ship, to a tank rolling across the USSR.

At times the images are completely unrelated to the story being told; what does a spinning banana have to do with a mission to space? But the way the images merge and move seems to echo the subject; it reminds you of floating, of falling, as though you too are in space.

Dead Star Light combines technologies to create an atmosphere in which viewers may feel as though they are dreaming. The viewer's sense of sound and sight are alternately engaged in their own and others' memories and they are caught between trying to remember if what they are experiencing is being repeated, or if the process of retelling the story has made it seem that way.

Kerry Tribe leaves visitors with a sense of re-emerging into the normal world after a journey into the mind, and questions over how effectively the memory can actually record everything you see and hear.

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