



Jane and Louise
Wilson
Normapaths 1995

of Collishaw trying to net fairies under a bridge rendered the whole question of desire silly – but the other way up, in that instead of exciting the spectator's impossible desires, the artist laid his own out for inspection. But is the answer to impossible desires not to start substituting possible ones? Or at least to try harder to put impossibility and possibility in dialogue? Like advertising Collishaw's work circulates around nullity within desire, around deadness. (A room of representations of angels from tombstones, silkscreened on to metal in negative and visible only by ultraviolet lights, seemed to approach that question of deadness more directly, though not in order to understand it.) It is also important, as in advertising, that you are allowed to see how each effect is produced, so as to identify with the structure (and trickery) that sets up feeling. 'He did it with mirrors' you tell yourself. (He very often does: *Hollow Oak* was a contraption seemingly designed to illustrate the phrase.)

Collishaw's works are unlike advertising in that the spectator does not, having been encouraged to see how it's done and identify with the set-up itself, feel any better about it all. Collishaw may be a kind of philistine, like Pygmalion, who wanted art to be enchanted, to move and breathe. And who must therefore emphasise disappointment, unreachability and loss (of definition, of spontaneous feeling) as the guarantors of mourned life, grasped only in the negative. I don't find this sort of philistinism, if that's at all the right word, unappealing. Like Damien Hirst's philistinism – that sense that art is not real enough and must be made more real – it has a disarming honesty, and its own slewed, helpless grasp of its time. At its best it throws out vivid technical metaphors for loops of emotional frustration that are not of its own making. The sense of passivity that results can certainly be questioned but not, perhaps, before its familiarity is admitted. ■

Ian Hunt is a writer.

■ Jane and Louise Wilson

Chisenhale Gallery London

November 22 to December 22

Milch London November 25 to December 17

Q. How many normapaths does it take to change a light-bulb? A. One, why?

Normapaths, 1995, the title of Jane and Louise Wilson's film at the Chisenhale Gallery, implies that emphatically normal behaviour, to be contrasted with that of *psychopaths*, constitutes a truly deviant, clinically bizarre choice of existence, something not normal at all. This and previous work of the Wilson twins suggest that the co-existence of madness with the everyday does not represent a pathology but provides a solution in getting on with things, and in any case better describes what we condone as 'normal behaviour' than we are willing to admit.

In a recent London lecture by Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek, he proposed that among the most effectively subversive modes of behaviour that might be adopted in order to enact social change is the excessive, insistent adherence to the rules of a power structure. Complying in all instances and with maniacal consistency to the rules ultimately results in the utter collapse of the system. The system undermined in two recent films (transferred to video) by Jane and Louise Wilson, *Normapaths* and *Crawl Space*, also 1995, at Milch, is our psychological reality, force fed by media images which shape our identities not as a pathology but as a newly normal means to mental health. The normapaths (a term first coined by Felix Guattari), those engaged in chronically normal codes of behaviour, never appear on the screen, so they must be us, the viewers. For this reason, then, the set of *Normapaths* – a dilapidated, charred kitchen – has been constructed in the gallery

1995-1996 College of
 Art and Design
 100-103 Curzon Road, London, W6M 0DU

itself, so as to bring the unreality of the imagery on the screen into the real time and place of the viewer. It is therapeutic, the way psychoanalysts suggest we return to the scene of trauma in order to exorcise its effects.

The films of the Wilson twins are always populated by individuals undertaking behavioural and gestural acts, never by real people, in a string of non-narrative imagery which draws heavily on television and film convention. The setting for *Normapaths*, in fact, is also a *set*, like that for a television show, and much of the iconography is reminiscent of TV action thrillers from *Hawaii Five-O* to *The Avengers* to women-in-prison docudramas. In one scene, jumpsuited young women, among them the artists, jump higher and higher on a trampoline, their faces distorted into grimaces by their efforts. This isn't fun jumping; this is more like a job, and could either be the practice of professional stunt women or some pathological pursuit of amusement. Another startling image sees one twin caressing her sister's face with a foot-shaped hand, a prosthesis born from the miracles of post-production. The action is loving; the result grotesque. The excessively normal, sisterly (affectionate) behaviour has brought with it a deformation.

In *Crawl Space* at Milch (and the related *Insert* included in the video collective 'Instant' on view at the Camden Arts Centre), the imagery is suggestive of film, rather than TV, genres. Horror movies meet space flicks meet psycho-dramas. As we watch one sister drag her twin, bound to a chair and gagged – perhaps for her own good – up the stairs, it is unclear if the body on the chair is being rescued, or whether we are witnessing an updated version of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* Like the Bette Davis/Joan Crawford movie classic, maybe

one sibling is under the murderous care of the other; maybe she's already dead. As in the face-caressing feet scene in *Normapaths*, again their excessive sisterly love, their extreme normalcy, has been crippling. Another image shows the close-up of one twin under water, somehow surviving, expelling a ping-pong ball from her mouth which bears within it the figure of a young woman – the other sister, no doubt. This kind of underwater birthing is replete with psychological undercurrents, like a dream, as one twin risks her life and turns motherly – another deviance from her relationship as sister.

The most remarkable imagery in *Crawl Space* is a that of a slowly breathing belly upon which appears, like a scar, the enigmatic title: CRAWL SPACE. At first the message of the raised letters is indecipherable, RAW PAIN it seems to say, and distracts us from what should be an overtly erotic image: the belly of a young woman, shirt pushed up, zipper unzipped. What dominates, perversely, is the gothic tale, the compelling image. The setting for the film is a sort of haunted house; most of the scenes take place under the eaves and in other undefinable recesses – indeed the crawl spaces, not meant to be inhabited by humans – although some we can occupy by *crawling on our bellies*. In the psychological interpretation of dreams, the house can represent the self, and here the Wilson twins' connection between the outer shell of the house and human skin, of something crawling under your skin, is especially effective. Elements in *Crawl Space* include the puffy insulation in the attic – the skin-like padding around the house; or a figure trapped in a floating bubble, another outer membrane of protection and entrapment.

Like a dream about trains and tunnels, *Crawl Space* is just begging for analysis. As the chromatics and execution of the Wilson sisters' films have become noticeably masterful, so has their ability to make connections between language and imagery. Better still, neither film is ever boring; what has not been lost in their work, fortunately, is its pervasive humour: how else can we explain the pun of twin sisters presenting their film, as they have at Chisenhale, on a pair of double screens? ■

Normapaths will be shown at the **Berwick Gymnasium Gallery** Northumberland May 19 to June 23.

Gilda Williams is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

■ Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion

CCA Glasgow December 16 to January 28

Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion live in the very remote Scottish village of St Combs, near Peterhead, and their elemental location has informed much of their collaborative practice. The new project *Wing*, commissioned for this exhibition, was prompted by deep litter chicken farming in the area. An investigation of the methods of rearing chickens in this less cruel/more economic way led the artists to make a video-based resituation of an interior of one of the huge barns holding the birds. Four superb conical convection heaters hung down from the ceiling while on the warm floor underneath three of them, circular white powdered patches on the floor caught video projections of chickens in their yellowish mass. The chickens, at this size generic rather than

Matthew Dalziel and
Louise Scullion
The Gifted Child 1995

