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Brilliant Tilley

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Shadow power: The Peter Tilley show at The University Gallery.

Peter Tilley's sculpture at the University Gallery until April 14 covers ground not only new to him, but rarely visited by artists.

The gallery is full of large and small figures, all autobiographically male, accompanied by their shadows. For such an intrinsic aspect of our everyday lives, it is surprising how rarely these dark semi-selves appear in works of art. For how few painters does Light inevitably invoke Darkness?

Shadow has always been a constant for sculptors and, for Peter Tilley, his appropriation of the solid sentient metal figure a decade ago was perhaps the impetus for this current body of work, the visual component of his candidature for a PhD.

Older readers may recall his earlier works with found objects and their emotional resonance. Vanitas associations brought awareness of themes of life and death with the past history of birds' bones and ceramic fragments as elegiac celebrations of mortality.

The meanings of materials, as well as their evocation of memory and transience, have fed naturally into Peter Tilley's concern for our shadows, our alter egos and the forms, myths and magic we read into them.

It is easy to relate to the dozens of works in the exhibition, at least at a superficial level. If we think about them, our shadows become dark mirror images of ourselves, essential parts of our everyday existence. There are many dire stories about the search for lost shadows. Think of Peter Pan, who must be reunited with his shadow to become completely human.

Peter Tilley also reveals shadows we are less aware of; long emanations embedded in bones, the embodiments of past dramas in a sort of poetic shorthand. He has an ability to make complex issues visible, to imply metaphysical meaning in apparently simple images.

The restraint of his generalised everyman form recalls the artist's interest in the death rites of Ancient Egypt and the potent but static figures of their funerary sculpture. Equally enigmatic is a work where an empty chair anchors the long shadow of a previous occupant. Our alter egos can have lives of their own, like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde or the portrait of Dorian Grey.

Peter Tilley is well aware of the literary legacy of his subject from the German Romantics and the dark-light dichotomies in Jungian psychoanalytic theory. His work also has an affinity with the figure assemblages placed in the landscape by contemporary British sculptor Antony Gormley, though in Tilley's case the interior life of the individual takes precedence over its place in nature, in salt lake or on mountaintop. Coal, with its associations of dark pollution, does however make an appearance.

Dramatically presented and thought engendering, this is an exciting exhibition. Peter Tilley is one of this area's most widely exhibited artists. How lucky we are to have a resident artist of this stature, constantly evolving, continuing to unravel the great issues of existence.

Peter Tilley, Seeing the Shadow, The University Gallery, until April 14.