

RUNNING AT NIGHT

Beginning in fourth grade, Jeremy Bakker played baseball with a commitment that began slowly, but which increased throughout his teenage years until, in his early twenties, it reached a kind of crescendo. By then Bakker had accepted a scholarship to a college in Idaho, and moved there from Australia to live the sport 24/7.

This involved rigorous discipline: he would wake in the accommodation he shared with his teammates, rise at 6:30am, and hit the gym before class. At 1.30pm five hours of field-work began: sprinting, hitting, catching, throwing; one drill after another until the thought of action retreated into the kind of muscle memory that professional sport is built upon. With it came the infuriating battle to remain focused and, on good days, the brief yet wondrous payoff of action made perfect.

Training of this nature, which is essentially the exertion of absolute discipline upon body and mind, might be characterised in two distinct ways. The first – in which the overwhelming presence of the objective mind is removed in favour of something as close to instinct as possible – would have it as an absolute freedom. The second – in which we might argue that under such a regime the self is overcome by the tyranny of action – would have it as an absolute constraint.

As any dedicated sportsperson would tell you, both contain truth.

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The thing about baseball is it's a team game, but it also isn't: that's how Bakker thinks of it now, decades after he gave the game away for good.

He explained this during my recent visit to his Brunswick studio, a small, white painted, second-floor room that looks out over a tumble of corrugated iron rooftops.

In baseball there is of course a team around which the whole game turns, but there is also a moment where one is locked in solitary battle, when the batter faces off against the pitcher and the whole field focuses inwards.

Then it's the pitch, and the swing. And, if the muscle memory aligns perfectly in the moment, the high, dull *chok!* of aluminum bat connecting with leather ball.

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In Bakker's studio there was a handful of recent work: sublimely simple gestures, recursive in nature, that seemed to simultaneously open outwards and fold inwards.

There was a line of rough glass objects: various glassware melted down one by one, each of them then poured into a cast of their own volume. It was a work both solid and fragile. Bakker had titled it *Manifest density*, a phrase that seemed to somehow capture the work's oddly poetic contradictions.

There was a drawing that marked in thick skeins of ink the passing of time. How much Bakker was unsure, but the materiality of it was dense with repetitive action: seconds, months, perhaps even years, made manifest.

A perfectly framed image of the dark side of the moon was to be presented on a shelf, its face turned against the wall and hidden. Bakker was thinking about the futility of trying to find the absolute limits of knowledge or thought. What was the point of any practice if there wasn't always something held just out of reach, imagined but never known?

As a final counterpoint among a group of works already marked by material difference, a gleaming new iPad was to be affixed to the wall like a tiny painting. On its screen an image of a Neolithic stone tool was as clear as the real thing. It had been photographed perfectly on a black background. Hovering above was the tiny white Macintosh hand icon, instantly familiar to anyone who has ever used an Apple device (ie: near everyone). It moved almost nervously across the stone's surface.

There was a joke to this work, of course – two tools from opposite ends of human history brought into unexpected alignment – but it was the sense of care that made it. The hand icon caressed the tool with utmost respect, as if trying to tease forth its mysteries by touch alone.

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Talking about art is hard, but one way to do it is to talk about art in the way we might talk about sport: a result of the body and mind being trained in a certain way to bring forth euphoric and perhaps unexplainable phenomena.

Sport shows us that bodies can achieve strange things when carefully trained and then unleashed in controlled scenarios. It's something about the release of a potential previously withheld from access. Or the feeling that through a set of rules outcomes might be better understood, and thus more intensely felt. Or the sense that unthinking action propels bodies forwards through time in a fashion that ameliorates the mind's anxieties.

It's hard to say with any precision.

In lieu of anything more concrete, my mind turns here to something I read only recently, and which returned to me as I looked at Bakker's work and thought about how it was made, about the carefully controlled scenarios that brought it into being.

A little known long-distance runner attempts to explain to the uninitiated the strange lure of his discipline:

One of the things I used to like to do was run in the dark.

You can go out and run really hard in the dark and you actually feel like you don't have a body. You feel like you're just this head moving around. You're just out there, floating. It's like this distilled transcendence.

- Quentin Sprague, July 2018