

**CASEY KAPLAN**  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

# ST JAMES'S

## LONDON

**David Thorpe**

21.10.2015



With over 17,000 individual pieces of leather and 1,000 handmade tiles, St James's latest piece of public art honours the artisan and instils the profound joy in making. The first of three artists creating site-specific works for the new St James's Market, we met David Thorpe to talk mud, medieval tiling and our modern-day relationship with objects.

### **Who is David?**

I was part of a very lucky generation. Before the big boom of BritArt, the London art scene was tiny. There was Lisson Gallery but there wasn't really anyone else dealing in contemporary art. My tutor – a guy called Peter Owen – was running one of the best artist-run gallery spaces in London called City Racing. It was part of a squat, over in Oval. I think it was the place where Sarah Lucas had her debut show. He offered me a solo show and through that I got a bit of interest, and worked with Paul Noble. And when the YBAs (Young British Artists) came, a generation of young galleries came up with them – White Cube and Maureen Paley being the most obvious. So at the end of an MA at Goldsmiths, a lot of us finished with three or four offers – that's really unusual. That kind of expansion hasn't happened since.

## **How do you describe your art?**

When you come out of art school, you're trained to have a spiel, "my work is about..." But Goldsmiths is quite good at saying "your work is not about... your work is." You don't want your work to be about something, but rather somehow absorbed into the work. So with my work, I would want elements of the obsessions I have – politics or social theory, the relationship of the human to the world, the way I make stuff, the materials I use. I hope that the artwork stands on its own and glares back, and the work is the proposition.

## **What's in the studio right now?**

Right now, I'm making some sculptures using mud – wattle and daub finished with marquetry in mud. They weigh about a ton. They were meant to be for a museum show in February 2014, and... I don't think I'm halfway through! So yeah it's been a complete disaster.

## **What was the brief for St James's Market?**

The brief was for two interior panels and three panels outside – and for works that link to the history of the site and the area's artisan culture and background, and if possible St James's now. It's all been well organised by Futurecity for The Crown Estate.

## **What are you creating?**

There was quite a lot of tiling around St James's and Jermyn Street, but I didn't want to make pieces that were alien to me, so the tiles had to be handmade, where each one is slightly different. They are based on this book designer called T. J. Cobden-Sanderson – he was an Arts and Crafts guy and he made one-off book covers and gave them as gifts to loved-ones. The outside panels go around a corner, almost like a book cover or jacket, and the interiors are like the inlay papers. An organic rose pattern is repeated over the tiles and then, roughly above head height, there's a hole with a light. It's not a beam, but a subdued haze, hinting at the secret, exclusive nature and elements of St James's and its private clubs. If you read bits of Graham Greene and Ian Fleming, they're always set around this area. And the private gambling places of the '70s and '80s. Everything's a potential door or entrance. I wanted that exclusivity but also encasing and loving the building.

As you step back, the patterned tiles become a dense wall. It's the same with the background of a Burne-Jones painting, there's this shallow depth. Or like with William Morris – a move to graphic pattern making. I really like patterns as protective coverings.

## **Tell us how you've gone about making the tiles.**

It's a very simple technique that has been proved to be quite complicated to do! It's the medieval technique of encaustic tiling, where you press a pattern into wet clay, and that creates channels that you pour a runnier mix into. Here it's white slip poured into black clay. So it's not painted on, it's embedded. I've been working with a guy called Jason Marks up in Nottingham. His studio is more like a laboratory. He shares with two research fellows working with ceramics on a micro level for heart valves. The kiln is part of Nottingham Trent's art school but the press is in his garden shed. I like that combination – hands-on making meets NASA technology. High tech and hobby – this fits me.

## **What's happening with the interiors?**

Here, corian panels over five and six metres high are wrapped in a pattern of different leathers. The leather is far more tactile and traditionally linked with St James's. The scale of the pattern is matched to 17th century waistcoat designs, so it's still relatable at the human scale, like embroidery on clothes. In greens and browns, and leaves in tawny yellow, the leather pattern wraps around the edges, like how you wrap gifts. The application of the nearly 17,236 individual pieces will take all summer.

## **How important is the made-ness of the art?**

It comes through John Ruskin and the idea of the loved object – a labour of love. For Ruskin, there's a love exchange between the maker and the object. And that the value of the object is really the

the embedded labour within it

Today, we're often alienated from our objects. We really don't know who made them, the steps behind them. You might know it was maybe partly made in China, India, or Germany, but you don't know the transport networks, the conditions of making, who was paid what – it's impossible to find this line from human-to-human-to-human-to-human. But when you're art making – and especially with this St James's commission – you increasingly care about the labour that's gone into a piece.

### **What did you think of doing a piece for St James's?**

When I first heard about the commission, I was nervous about public sculpture and its link to gentrifying areas. I've suffered from gentrification – I lost my Bermondsey studio and my apartment within seven weeks. Hence the move to Germany! This is my first piece of public art. But with St James's, I find it interesting 'cause you can't gentrify the most gentrified place on Earth. It's the home of the urban gentry.

I always used to use St James's Market as a walk-through – it was a no-man's-land. So I think it's not a bad thing that this is being developed. Its impact will simply continue its heritage as an exclusive area.

### **How's progress?**

I'm still trying to understand the scale. It's only the last visit to Mike Smith Studio, where I got to see the panels, and I started to think, oh these are huge – its intensity's all the more surprising with the detail. Because of the scale, and that it has to be there for at least 25 years, you have to work with professionals. Most of the time I'm in my studio, the stress is usually mine and mine alone, the time of making is mine and mine alone – it's been a good change.

We [artists] talk about this artists' blues. There are moments when you're making it and you realise you're falling out of love. At the moment I have the mud boxes. One is the size of an elephant and you have to stroke it and apologise for why it's taking so long to come into being. Making is about trying to keep that love going. And sometimes, it's only at the end when you know if you've still got that connection or not.

This feels different. It might be different because it will be there for such a long time. Other pieces, they go into storage or to a collector's home, so I don't necessarily get to see them again, or it falls apart but in twenty years time, these walls will still be there.

### **When will it be up and finished?**

Late Summer 2016.

Photography: Polly Braden

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# this is tomorrow

## David Thorpe : A Rare Beast

Maureen Paley

8 June - 22 July 2012

Review by Henry Little

Libidinous, bulbous plants, groaning patterned monoliths, crafted vertebrae and a fleshy length of oak: David Thorpe's exhibition marries Victorian artisanal creed with the science-fiction, fantasy landscapes of previous years.

Earlier works from the middle of the last decade depicted precarious architecture and emblematic civilisations in the wilderness, alone, but romantic and picturesque. Here, we see this peculiar world up close. A monument on eight wooden legs, just tall enough to make you feel small, occasionally asserts itself with a low groan. This seems strange, emanating from a rustic, ornate wall facsimile, devotedly inlaid with looping foliage patterns and constructed in antiquated wattle and daub. Its near neighbour, an upright screen with domestic dark brown tiles with a white foliage pattern, is comparably emphatic in its love of Victorian design.



Like the highly influential nineteenth-century writer and critic John Ruskin (1819 - 1900), Thorpe's current body of work foregrounds a fascination with the relationship between art and nature. And, more specifically, the tension and difference between imitating and recording nature. Ruskin was a keen advocate of botanical illustration, in fact championing these humble craftsmen as artists, not merely 'illustrators', and was an avid water-colourist himself. In Thorpe's botanical watercolours, we see this same impetus to record accurately, but instead of known plants we are presented with fantastical specimens derived, as we may suppose, from the artist's own universe. These works, if you are so inclined, are truly exceptional. 'Ecstatic Hangings' (2012) bears the erotic fruit of the work's title. A long, fibrous plant, it's as alien to my eyes as most exotic plants, but clearly imagined by Thorpe. At its tip, a delicate blue flower atop a spiked central limb, with small blue berries distributed in pairs along its length. Finally, a circle of white orbs about its base, followed by a cluster of suggestive vegetal sacks - the 'ecstatic hangings' of the work's title.

Upstairs the biological and anatomical associations are drawn out in greater detail. In the middle of the gallery 'Gangraena' (2012) is a complicated proposition, although of simple appearance. A lengthy section of ancient oak has the warm colouring of flesh, painted using a medieval technique with countless layers worked up from a dark purple, to give the convincing illusion of human warmth under the surface. Here then we have a means of imitating nature applied to a found natural object: nature and its image conflated to produce an uncanny artefact. The title of the work is also steeped in historical meaning. Gangraena is the name of a heresiographic tome (i.e. a chronicle of heresy and blasphemy incidents) written by the zealous puritan Thomas Edwards (c. 1599 - 1648). Crucially, this account has a distinct reputation for adversarial tone and hard line puritanical doctrine - as you might imagine from a title which equates heresy with the deathly sores of gangrene. If, as the press release states, this body of work was conceived in opposition to Thomas Edwards, then Thorpe's lively oak celebrates Ruskin's vigorous identification of humanity with nature, and rejects Edwards' denial of our natural urges towards a freedom of emotive and religious conscience.

Little, Henry, *David Thorpe: A Rare Beast*, this is tomorrow, July 2012, Online.

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**PORT**



David Thorpe: A Rare and Gentle Beast  
July 13, 2012

William Kherbek reviews the fourth solo exhibition by British artist David Thorpe at Maureen Paley, London

There's a school of thought that proposes genius is manifested by making the difficult look effortless. If that's the case, then David Thorpe, whose show, *A Rare and Gentle Beast*, is currently running at the Maureen Paley Gallery in Bethnal Green, is doing his best to resist any accusations of "genius"; his works are, literally, object lessons in making the difficult look difficult.

For Thorpe, following in the intellectual tradition of John Ruskin and William Morris, process is itself a proper subject matter for art. Readers acquainted with the theoretical models and movements which have followed Morris, et al will perhaps feel their skepticism aroused by this kind of open-hearted commitment to "honouring traditional methods" as Thorpe's press release intones. Isn't there something a bit po-faced about all this "honouring" and valourising? This being art, matters are never as simple as that.

One of the ways Thorpe resists accusations of being an aesthetic reactionary is in the careful way the show is laid out. Entering the spacious downstairs of the gallery, the first thing you see is nothing. Well, not *exactly* nothing; an obtrusive jut of white wall is what you see. Only after you make your way around this architectural intrusion can you see the works, and they are very much worth seeing. As you might expect given the heavy emphasis on traditional methods, there is a familiarity about the geometric formations that make up works like *Sanderson Emerged*, a thick ceramic piece which is something like a wall and a sculpture at the same time. It's Thorpe's capacity to liberate these methods and materials from their historic applications that announces his self-conscious modernity — or is that post-modernity?

The piece which is referenced in the title of the show, *A Rare Beast*, is another "wall/sculpture" that nicely

asserts its physicality, but really comes into its own when a mournful, low-pitched moan emanates from it. When you consider that the piece is composed of hair, dung, rabbit skin, and clay all kinds of narratives begin to proliferate. It's hardly "organic" in any normal sense of the term, but there's an irreducible vitality to it which would probably have gotten Thorpe burned at the stake in the Middle Ages. As an installation, the downstairs has more aesthetic unity than the upstairs, which feels more like a collection of works of art than a field of experience. Despite this fact, works like *Gangraena*, a plank of ancient oak treated with glue, chalk, and—of course—rabbit skin demand and repay attention.

There is a series of works in the show modeled on various human bones. The pieces are displayed in both galleries. Titled *These Are Our Bones, Grown Dressed then Cloaked*, it, at times, falls victim to Thorpe's fetishisation of meticulous process, but, when individual pieces work, their eerie eloquence is riveting. For me, the patella displayed in the downstairs installation is most affecting. Unassumingly resting on a shelf at the south end of the gallery, as you approach it, the patella morphs from sculpture to stone to bone. True to Thorpe's aesthetic, the process isn't rapid, but the results are durable.

- by William Kherbek



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Núñez-Fernández, Lupe, *The Shape of Things to Come: New Sculpture*, London: Saatchi Gallery, 2011, p. 118

# DAVID THORPE



David Thorpe was born in 1972 in the UK and completed his MA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths University, London. His most recent solo exhibition was at the Kunstverein Hannover in 2010. He has also had solo shows at the Kunsthaus Glarus, Switzerland, Tate Britain and Camden Arts Centre, London, and Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Germany. Thorpe lives in Berlin.

David Thorpe's work is concerned with the relationship between objects and their makers, with a particular interest in the role of craft and labour in handmade design and art. "I'm playing with certain associations," he has said, "slightly New Age, slightly Space Age, slightly threatening. I'm absolutely in love with people who build up their own

systems of belief." This idea is reflected in works that variously reference modernist principles of object-making, utopian social architecture, Japanese woodblock prints, and Victorian papercutting.

In the past Thorpe has made elaborate collaged paintings, but his more recent work explores the actualisation of pattern through unusual three-dimensional renderings that highlight the tension between exquisite decorativeness and the aura of DIY home-craft manuals.

The works shown here all make reference to an interconnectedness between ideology and lifestyle. *I Am Golden* (2002) is a miniature temple-like structure that also doubles as a plant stand. *Endeavours* and *Private Lives* (both 2010) allude to the aesthetics and theories of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century and the democratising art ideals of William Morris and John Ruskin. Thorpe's large pattern-covered objects have been executed with the collaborative assistance of skilled artisans trained in recreating labour-intensive medieval recipes for making paint and ceramic moulds.

The mesmerising repeated motifs of *Endeavours* are inspired by William Morris' elaborate title page for John Ruskin's famous essay 'Nature of Gothic', which defines the artist as 'a Naturalist' who seeks true beauty by illustrating nature and the human being 'in its wholeness'.

Labour in and of itself stands as the central, distilled idea behind Thorpe's object, whose functionality is deliberately unclear. *Private Lives*, a plaster form resting on wooden legs, is similarly adorned with stylised leaves and vines made of carefully cut leather. Emanating from it is a light that imbues the sculpture with an almost devotional symbolic charge of self-sufficiency.

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# Art in America

 INTERNATIONAL REVIEW EXHIBITION REVIEWS

February 2011

**DAVID THORPE**

CASEY KAPLAN

Defying categorization, the large-scale objects in "Peace Not Pacifism," an exhibition by British-born, Berlin-based artist David Thorpe, embrace the antithetical esthetics of Minimalism and the Arts and Crafts movement (all works 2010). The first piece one saw upon entering the gallery was *The Collaborator*, a rectangular box—a "specific object" of sorts—raised off the floor on splayed wooden legs. Narrowly braced in wood, the panels that constitute its sides are painted in oil with interlacing floral patterns that could have been sourced from William Morris. Though visually intriguing enough, *The Collaborator* also emits a startling hum that is activated as spectators approach and fades as they pass: hence its witty title. This odd mixture of craft and technology was recapitulated in several smaller raised boxes. Their side panels are made of plaster decorated with leather vines and flowers, but rather than sound, a shockingly bright light could be viewed through a small square aperture in one side of each. You could not help but think of a film projector, though it's difficult to imagine work less inclined to the photographic.

Likewise laboriously handcrafted, two monumental pieces consist of expanses of ceramic tiles glazed with lush, dark brown ornamentation: an imposing 10-foot-tall screen, *Endeavors*, and *The Plague*, stretching along the floor for 23 feet and looking like a cross between a Carl Andre sculpture and a palace pavement.

Thorpe initially gained recognition for two-dimensional cut-paper landscapes. Here, his work on paper consisted of a delicately painted five-part watercolor depicting bamboolike

plants with elegant foliage. It could almost be a mock-up for scenic wallpaper, and, indeed, one wonders where the artist is heading. The recent, characteristically collaborative work at Kaplan represents a shift to more monumental formats and complex effects if not outright architectural ambitions. Based on the works in this fine show, I wouldn't be surprised if Thorpe were to go on to fashion a highly developed, all-enveloping *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

—Matthew Israel



David Thorpe: *The Collaborator*, 2010, wood, oil paint and sound system, 84 by 93¼ by 43 inches; at Casey Kaplan.

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DAVID THORPE

PEACE NOT PACIFISM

EXHIBITION DATES:

OCTOBER 28 – DECEMBER 18, 2010

OPENING:

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 28, 6 – 8 PM

GALLERY HOURS:

TUESDAY – SATURDAY, 10 AM – 6 PM

Casey Kaplan is pleased to present David Thorpe's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Thorpe's installations are extraordinarily handcrafted realms that linger between futuristic and historical environments. His work reinterprets turn of the 20th century culture by capturing the utopian spirit in an entirely imagined atmosphere.

The exhibition is comprised of watercolors, sculptures, and large-scale ceramic tile screens. Much like the work of the skilled artisan of the Arts and Crafts Movement (c. 1860–1910), Thorpe's pieces are ornately detailed and meticulously rendered. Honoring medieval recipes for paint and ceramic molds, each work is labor intensive and pragmatically applied with several layers of paint and glaze. Thorpe is motivated in particular by the work of William Morris and John Ruskin. Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" describes his theories of the ideal artist as a "Naturalist," a person who seeks the true beauty of nature by illustrating its entirety. The profound awe in nature is truthful, beautiful, and unequivocally sublime.

"...the great Naturalist takes the human being in its wholeness, in its mortal as well as its spiritual strength. Capable of sounding and sympathizing with the whole range of its passions, he brings one majestic harmony out of them all; he represents it fearlessly in all its acts and thoughts, in its haste, its anger, its sensuality, and its pride, as well as in its fortitude or faith, but makes it noble in them all." John Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic," (From *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II, published 1851-53).

Thorpe is interested in the relationship between the maker and the object, in the profound pride of the artisan and his love of the craft. These objects become animated through their execution and offer an alternative perspective with ideas of artistic production. Because these pieces are individually made by hand they are never the same. It is the aspiration or endeavor of skill in the handmade object that makes a work remarkably imperfect.

The labor in the stylized pattern work is the crux of Thorpe's oeuvre. There is a collaborative effort in working with trained artisans that Thorpe appreciates. By finding connections to professionals in their respective fields, Thorpe partners with a small set of craftsman in helping him create work that is well made and unique. Templates and designs are made to create densely organic objects that reject common function. Light sources and sounds are also integrated. In particular, finely cut leather is glued to two modular forms made of plaster. These forms, resting on wooden legs, are reminiscent of building blocks that have become completely encased with leaves and vines. From within, a source of light illuminates its hollowed form yet still conveying a mysterious void. These types of enclosures are further pronounced with the expansive ceramic screens, framing the space and creating a barrier of the artworks, like a forest of trees cloaking whatever lies inside. The watercolors similarly appear as shields of leaves encasing themselves. Wooded areas are often used as metaphors in E.M. Forster's work; as found in *Maurice* (written from 1913-1914, posthumously published in 1971) where the lead character has discovered a place that inadvertently allows him to be true to his self and away from society. For Thorpe, Forster's "greenwood" motif links closely to the decline of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as it evolved into an outlaw movement that needed privacy and secrecy in order to survive.

David Thorpe (b. 1972) was born in the United Kingdom and is based in Berlin, Germany. Thorpe recently had a solo exhibition at the Kunstverein Hannover last year; a publication of his work was made in conjunction with the exhibition. Additional past solo exhibitions include: "The Defeated Life Restored" at the Kunsthhaus Glarus, Switzerland, Camden Arts Centre, London, and Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Germany from 2007-2008 and "The Colonists" at Tate Britain in 2004. Group exhibitions include "The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art" at Tate St. Ives, United Kingdom and "Delusional Virtuosity" at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Netherlands in 2009.

FOR FURTHER EXHIBITION INFORMATION PLEASE CONTACT MEAGHAN KENT AT THE GALLERY, MEAGHAN@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

CASEY KAPLAN IS PLEASED TO PARTICIPATE IN ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH, December 2 – 5, 2010

NEXT GALLERY EXHIBITION: JOHANNES WOHNSEIFER, January 6 – February 5, 2011

GALLERY ARTISTS: HENNING BOHL, MATTHEW BRANNON, JEFF BURTON, NATHAN CARTER, MILES COOLIDGE, JASON DODGE, TRISHA DONNELLY, GEOFFREY FARMER, PAMELA FRASER, LIAM GILLICK, ANNIKA VON HAUSSWOLFF, CARSTEN HÖLLER, BRIAN JUNGEN, JONATHAN MONK, MARLO PASCUAL, DIEGO PERRONE, JULIA SCHMIDT, SIMON STARLING, DAVID THORPE, GABRIEL VORMSTEIN, GARTH WEISER, JOHANNES WOHNSEIFER

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INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM



David Thorpe – Veils and Shelters  
or Sparkles of Glory or Perfume Against the Sul-  
phurous Stinke of the Snuffe or the Light for  
Smoak

David Thorpe (born 1972) has developed parallel worlds of breathtaking beauty since the late nineteen nineties whose visionary character is fed by his passion for utopian ways of life. Thorpe's collages, sculptures, and space-filling installations are characterized by the meticulous application of handicraft techniques and unusual combinations of materials.

While his first large-format paper collages depict nocturnal scenes of fictional suburbs, he increasingly focused on untamed natures in his more colorful and detailedly worked silhouettes. The London-born artist entitled this contentual change of emphasis "Escape into the Wilderness" in his book "A Rendezvous with My Friends of Liberty": Mountain summits, towering pine trees and an expansive sky form the backdrop against which occasionally tiny groups of figures move.

Seemingly futuristic dwellings arise from the boundless expanse of wastelands far removed from civilization that can only be reached via cable car or by means of helicopters. Thorpe unmistakably references nineteenth-century art here, the landscapes of a Caspar David Friedrich or the American pioneer painting of the Hudson River School that represented the landscape as an event and celebrated the natural wonders of the New World.

Thorpe's pictorial vocabulary comprises numerous written and pictorial sources of inspiration which he samples and contrasts with each other. This is in accordance with the increasing complexity of his collage technique in which he assembles diverse elements into an integral whole: precisely arranged compilations of paper, dried bark and flowers, costume jewelry, leather, slate, model-building wood, pebbles, and modeling clay whose painterly appearance is uncanny from a distance.

The resulting synthesized buildings appear as if they were fortresslike meeting places of a separatist community and awaken associations with French revolutionary architecture by Étienne-Louis Boullée or the organic structures by Bruce Goff and testify to intense dealings with the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Thorpe's material collages are increasingly expanding into the third dimension and take the real space into consideration: Peculiar sculptural objects tower from simple wooden pedestals, fragile wood and glass constructions seem like afterimages of his architectonic creations, screens divide the spaces into individual compartments –

into a labyrinth of references and layers of meaning – and are fitted with minutely detailed watercolors of fantastic plants.

Presence and disappearance are linked in these spaces full of echoes and repercussions into a fascinating parcours through a cosmos marked by autarchy that simultaneously evokes the past and the present. "I was always concerned with producing safe areas when creating art, an inhabitable universe," as David Thorpe has described it.

David Thorpe has developed a new site-specific installation for the exhibition in the Kunstverein Hannover.

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09.01.2009 - 21.02.2009, Berlin

David Thorpe

## A Weak Light Flickering

We are pleased to present "A Weak Light Flickering", an installation by the British artist David Thorpe, in our Berlin gallery space.

Drawing on the form of a paravent, several elements set up in a rectangle construe an immanent room within a room. The structure is made of dark wooden panels and inlaid with a double layer of painted glass, displaying a geometrical grating of colour fields. While the exterior glass panes show warm, earthy tones, the panes that are visible from the interior are coated with deep green nuances. The installation's form and shape create a fragile yet defensive architectural structure, which marks an aesthetically autonomous space - framing it in the sense of a perimeter and demarcation - within which six panels are hung.

David Thorpe painted six poems in lucid green oil paint onto thin paper, reminiscent of newsprint due to its semitransparency, and integrated these into the temporary architectural piece as panels. The typeface as well as the design and vocabulary used draw on the pamphlets of the Ranters – a nonconformist denomination in the age of the British Commonwealth (1649-1660) and the English Civil War. In a tone both heroically proclamative and also wistful, Thorpe's pictorial written pieces recount a visionary, prophetic body of thought, cleaving to a pantheistic as well as subjectively idealistic ideology. Emphatically heralding a belief in an all encompassing and individually internalised divinity through the medium of literature recalls the style of 17th and 18th century "enthusiastic writing" – and finds its expression in Thorpe's poems as an associative, narrative, self-circulating monologue about existence, development and evanescence.

The corpus of Thorpe's poetry is constituted in particular by an expressive and manic rhetoric style, recalling Abiezer Coppe (a follower of the Ranters), as well as the corporeality of the verse, as found in poems by William Blake. The agglomerations of words that David Thorpe composes form a kind of anthem, concomitant as celebratory songs and as lyrical poetry. Similar to the way that the jazz composer Sun Ra understood his music as melodised poetry, Thorpe integrates a musical element in his poems, characterised by a rhythmic word structure. Repetition (as reiteration and as duplication) and breaks in repetition form the choral basis of his narrative notations.

David Thorpe does not only seize on historical, literature-based utopias by interweaving and incorporating a socialistic romanticism in his art – much like the utopian writings of William Morris- and reflecting upon the wild and primal (as in D. H. Lawrence's work). Rather, the artist participates with these utopias in his eidetic vocabulary to describe his own idealism, which is articulated fragmentarily in the watercolour-like poems, creating a visionary and real picture. As an extroversion of the inward, and as a cultivation of the self, the narrative hymn of David Thorpe's poetry creates a connecting link between his drawings, collages and sculptures, and unifies these within the spatial installations to the tune of a silent melody, forming a shimmering costume of symbolic language.

Christina Irrgang

(Translation Zoe Miller)

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German Solo Shows: David Thorpe Hannover,  
Art World, August/September 2009, p.18.



Thorpe: courtesy Zabudowicz Collection

## DAVID THORPE HANNOVER

In the late 1990s, David Thorpe began making large-scale paper collages of imaginary cityscapes. He then turned his attention to nature and the wilderness while still incorporating architectural structures, and his recent collages contain objects such as tissue paper, dried bark, slate and leather. For this show, there will be older work, like *The Defeated Life Restored* from 2006 (above), and new installations with three large collages.

• *David Thorpe, Kunstverein Hannover, Hannover; 29 Aug-8 Nov, [www.kunstverein-hannover.de](http://www.kunstverein-hannover.de)*

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Wood, Catherine, Focus London, Artists Directory: David Thorpe,  
Flash Art, October 2008, p.97.



**DAVID THORPE**

London, 1972. Lives and works in London.

Woven through David Thorpe's collages, sculptures, drawings and screens is an implied narrative that conjures the notion of a 'world' of the artist's making. Thorpe has often spoken of his practice in terms that evoke an extended metaphorical fiction. This fiction is not the content, but the enabler of the work's cultivation however, permitting Thorpe a reclusive engagement with the practice of inventing and crafting objects and pictures.

(Catherine Wood)

Represented by: Maureen Paley, London; 303

Gallery, New York; Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe, Germany.

The Defeated Life Restored, 2007. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

**CASEY KAPLAN**  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Coomer, Martin, Exhibition of the Week: David Thorpe, Camden Arts Centre, Time Out, 09 May 2007.



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### Camden Arts Centre Museums

.....

Though commissioned by Camden Arts Centre, David Thorpe's installation 'The Defeated Life Restored' is anything but site-specific; a gallery within a gallery, it seems almost like an independent state. You can walk round the outside of this dark wood structure, with its lattice of blue, green and brown glass, but the real action takes place inside, light years from NW3. This sense of turning one's back on the outside world tallies perfectly with Thorpe's ongoing interest in enlightenment and self-sufficiency. Via sculpture and quasi-botanical drawings, the London-based artist takes us from Edward Hicks's 'Peaceable Kingdom' and the arts and crafts movement to the architecture of Bruce Goff, visiting failed utopias of the past while making a case for aesthetic and conceptual separatism today, as art drifts towards the mainstream. And, if we tend to think of isolationists as being a bit menacing, Thorpe -- who has described making art in terms of a 'military defence strategy' has come up with three missile-like sculptures, inlaid with tile and resting on frosted glass plinths like gothic revival Death Stars.

Thorpe came to attention about a decade ago with intricate collages depicting night-time, modernist dreams that tapped into the post YBA vogue for a more homely, craftsy approach. More switched-on than many of his peers, he has always allied attention to detail and craftsmanship to devotion and its danger-



*Detail from 'The Defeated Life Restored'*

ous flipside, obsession. It's this seesaw motion that gives the work its edge. Seduced by poise and polished aesthetic, you can't help but feel that there must be a slightly malevolent creator behind the scenes. As much as you are free to enter this world, it necessarily retains a note of elitism. The question to ask yourself on the way out is: do I feel excluded or exceptional?

Martin Coomer

## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Knoll, Valérie, Reviews: David Thorpe, Kunsthaus Glarus, *Artforum*, Summer 2007, pp. 514-515.

A work of strange beauty, David Thorpe's installation *The Defeated Life Restored*, 2007, was co-commissioned by three institutions: Kunsthaus Glarus and the work's successive venues, the Camden Arts Centre, London, and Museum Kurhaus Kleve, Germany. At Kunsthaus Glarus, the work was presented in a room with two long walls of windows and a tiled floor, a setting more like a church community hall than the white cube of a museum. Here the artist built an environment of screens, crowned by zigzagging tops, whose intricate wood supports create geometric patterns paned with green and blue glass. The architecture of this structure draws on spatial elements found in the interiors of churches and specifically evokes stained-glass windows. The mirrorlike quality of the glass, which prevents light from penetrating, creates a hermetically sealed space, insulated from the outside world; unable to see out, the viewer is constantly confronted with images of herself.

The pedestals of the three large sculptures that dominate the interior are also constructed from wood and glass. The star-shaped sculptures are made of tile; one might be reminded of crystalline structures. Six frames that are intricately integrated into the screens hold large-format watercolors whose delicacy counterpoints the imposing physicality of the installation. These fictional plant studies in the style of old-fashioned biology books are also reminiscent of Karl Blossfeldt's formally rigorous photographs of plants. At first glance they appear naturalistic, but on closer observation they reveal themselves to be stylized and technoid "superplants" whose forms are as threatening as they are graceful.

Thorpe has created a strange, sealed-off world where the natural and the artificial, the real and the fictional, New Age and Space Age fuse in a coherent aesthetic gesture. It is a bizarrely timeless space that draws on the past as much as it depicts an unreal present or a distant future, evoking (as the work's title suggests) the insistent yearning for alternative ways of living and the failure of past utopias. Thorpe's interest in utopian and obscure faith communities reflects, one imagines, a restrained sympathy.



David Thorpe,, *The Defeated Life Restored*, 2007, mixedmedia installation, dimensions variable.

His respect for the Arts and Crafts movement emerges in his meticulous craftsmanship as well as his search for harmonious formal principles. The number three, a perennial symbol for spiritual harmony, constitutes the installation's dominant formal principle, present not only in the three sculptures but also in the many triads in the plant illustrations and in the geometric wall structures. Completely untouched by pathos, kitsch, or ideology, this work is not an allegory for the death of utopian ideals but a representation of the constant metamorphosis of this human longing--its recurrent capacity to spread from an ideal "nowhere" to a possible "somewhere." Utopia, as Max Horkheimer put it, leaps beyond time.

-Valerie Knoll

Translated from German by Jane Brodie

## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

O'Reilly, Sally, Reviews: David Thorpe, Camden Arts Centre,  
*Art Review*, Issue 13, July - August 2007, p.128.



The Defeated Life Restored, 2007  
(installation view, Camden Arts  
Centre, London). © the artist  
and Camden Arts Centre. Courtesy  
Maureen Paley, London

David Thorpe's installation *The Defeated Life Restored* (2007) is unequivocally handsome, possessing all the requisite attributes: it is beautifully wrought, commands the space with authority yet withholds its mysterious intent. Indeed, many who enter the enclosed space, bound by geometric-patterned wooden screens and housing a series of exquisite watercolours and marquetry-clad sculptures, swoon at its somewhat traditional values of excellent craftsmanship and inscrutable aestheticism. The imagery appears to be tightly bound by some internal logic and is self-referential to the point of cabalism, and yet there are enough identifiable references to hint at the nature of its ideological heart. It is tantalisingly aloof but ultimately desirable - the consummate formula for wooing.

This is not intended as a derogatory characterisation, more an analogy for Thorpe's interleaving of such postmodernist strategies as quotation, faux autonomy and self-mythologising. For the last decade or so he has conducted a practice that has fabricated the concomitant mythology of an obsessive and reclusive artist at odds with canonical art history, evidenced by the work's subject matter as well as its facture. Through allusions to defunct cults, counterculture and obsolete ideologies, and by purloining motifs and visual languages from such arcane sources as Quakerism and botanical illustration, Thorpe has always drawn on the outsider while operating resolutely within the commercial artworld. And yet, while many around him have been making bad paintings and trash sculpture, he has rather ungroovily honed the techniques of the artisan. In a feedback loop of artifice and genuine intention, this laborious craftsmanship, which has evolved over the years from small paper collages to installations more like mystical garden design, substantiates the suggestion of a romantically isolated artist.

Of course we all know that the thrust of post-structural appropriationism and an awareness of art-historical context underpin this apparently self-engrossed practice, and it is perhaps

the metafictional impulse beyond the immediate fiction that is more interesting. Thorpe's botanical illustrations recall those of Ernst Haeckel, the nineteenth-century evolutionary theorist who fudged observational biological drawings by embellishing and idealising their forms into a sort of organic baroque. Thorpe's impeccable watercolours reduce plant forms to motifs through the sheer force of idealisation, so that a cone of red berries and an impossible array of leaf shapes sprouting from a single stem become heraldic or allegorical in their perfection. But whereas Haeckel's motive was the consolidation of knowledge in a hierarchical, colonial world, Thorpe's is the very opposite. His wood and glass screens and missile-like sculptures quote from an array of esoteric belief systems, with the geometry invariably encouraging an anachronistic sci-fi reading, so that notions of history, fact and intellectual principality become unmoored. Thorpe authors images and objects as if they are isolated elements of a whole aesthetic proposition, just as a filmmaker or novelist carves out a universe for characters to inhabit and events to transpire. Given only the fragmentary rudiments of Thorpe's universes, though, we can grasp more the contingency of their manufacture than the affect of their entirety. *Sally O'Reilly*

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TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

O'Reilly, Sally, David Thorpe Interim Art.  
Time Out, N° 1816, June 08-15 2005

## David Thorpe Interim Art East End

Those who thought they might be able to second-guess David Thorpe's latest work will probably be thwarted. Although his subject matter still meanders through the annals of utopian counterculture, the form has shifted a gear. Instead of his increasingly intricate collages, there are paintings and drawings and a robust, free-standing wood-and-glass screen that arguably approximates an alpine view forced into a harlequin-pattern geometry, but is far more detached from illusory imagery than Thorpe's previous mountain vistas.

A painted song-sheet, announcing that 'the inner light/is within me/ ecstasy is here/you are nothing...', provides a mystical anthem or watercolour of ab-

stract devices, figures in pagan-flavoured costume and mysterious organic entities that might circumspectly be referred to as plants. Illustrations of diamond-shaped enclosures that mysteriously lack entrance or exit, three 'radicals' in britches and jerkins, and a 'defeated jolly fellow' are like pages torn from an obscure heraldical-manac. Although perhaps lacking the virtuosity of Thorpe's previous collages and assemblages, a new fluidity between these dislocated inventions creates a more convincing narrative, suggesting gestalts in the throes of formulation.

- Sally O'Reilly

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121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

**David  
Thorpe**

Kings of the  
Night

1998, Paper  
Collage  
149 x 168cm

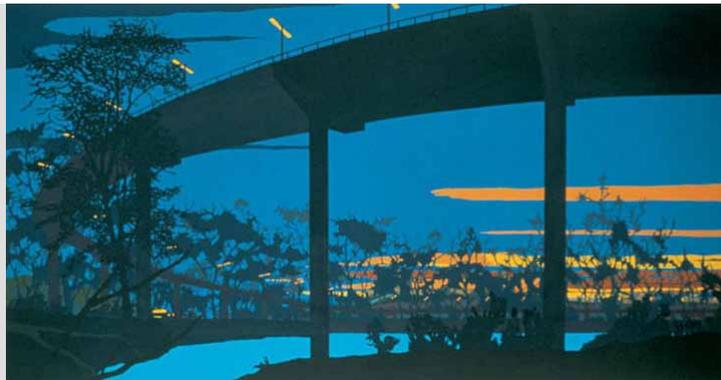


David Thorpe's early collages exhibit all the painstaking labour of his involved process. Inspired by Victorian shadow puppets and Japanese woodcuts, *Kings of the Night* is deceiving in its complexity made simple. Constructed entirely from cut and pasted sheets of paper, David Thorpe uses only 5 colours to create this romantic scene of lonely South London tower blocks. Planning his image in ascending layers he creates an improbable sense of space: the buildings laid over sky, orange windows over buildings; each element convincingly self-contained and distanced with illusionary depth. The trees and plants are flawlessly cut in their doily-like intricacy from one solid sheet of card; the final details of a sublime world astoundingly reproduced in 2-dimensional kid-craft.

**David  
Thorpe**

We Never  
Sleep

1998, Paper  
Collage  
90 x 176cm

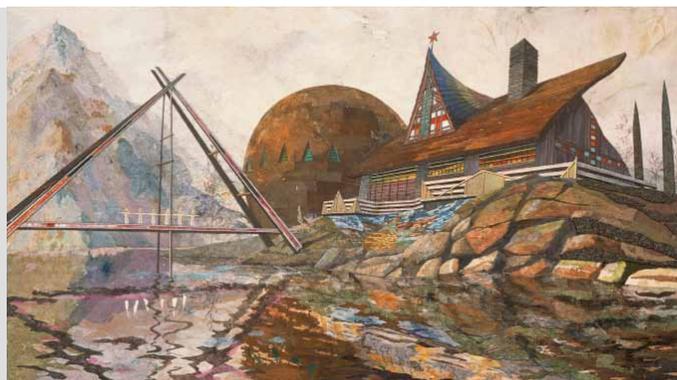


David Thorpe takes a leaf out of the home-craft manual and cuts coloured paper to project an idealised landscape that alludes more to an opening film shot of a city at night than the landscape in the painting. Inspired by daytime TV films, best selling paperbacks, and Japanese woodcut prints, David Thorpe constructs the sublime with cut and paste: scenes of urban isolation oozing sex appeal; 70s social architecture promising budget exotica.

**David  
Thorpe**

Covenant of  
the Elect

2002, Mixed  
Media Collage  
63 x 111cm



David Thorpe crafts the sublime from scissors and glue - intricate scenes of urban paradise made up of precision cut layers of paper, reminiscent of Japanese woodcuts, or Casper David Friedrich paintings.

## David Thorpe

Do What You Have To Do

1998, Paper  
Cut-Out  
142 x 170cm



David Thorpe is a young artist who lives and works in London. In *Do What You Have To Do*, Thorpe constructs a utopian setting of council blocks, giving a sense of awesome glamour to the banal, a leisurely chic to the two teenagers hanging out on the steps.

## David Thorpe

Forever

1998, Paper  
Collage  
36 x 145cm



David Thorpe's collages present a spiritual chic of urban romanticism: inner city buildings rendered desolate and magnificent, are contemplations of the individual vs. the universe. This 'power-of-one' conviction is replicated through David Thorpe's intensive process: each element is painfully stencilled with a penknife, and assembled with mind-boggling accuracy. Through his process, David Thorpe exemplifies the ability to create beauty from sheer will; macrocosms snipped from craft paper, the be-dazzling sight of council flats on a still night. In a car passing over the bridge, David Thorpe silhouettes a tiny group of partying teenagers: a tribute to dandyism and eternal youth.

## David Thorpe

The Quiet Voice

2004, Mixed  
Media Collage  
42 x 52cm



David Thorpe's collages have become more abstracted; moving away from depictions of isolated urban-scapes, his most recent work embodies the same sentiments of spirituality, design, and nature, but strips away the representational aspect. Rather than envision the sublime outer world, *The Quiet Voice* operates as a self-contained fetish. David Thorpe capitalises on the tautology of his materials. Set in an occult-ish triangle, Thorpe arranges a plane of wood veneer, masked by a mesh of real twigs. The small black square punctuates the field like a window, giving the sense that this is a building viewed in extreme close-up. By painting faint circles over the collaged ground, David Thorpe enforces his object as a formalist model, made intimate and devotional by the string of beads dangling from its edge.

## David Thorpe

Fragile  
Resistance

2004, Plaster  
and Leather  
59 x 15cm



"I'm playing with certain associations," David Thorpe divulges, "slightly New Age, slightly Space Age, slightly threatening...I'm absolutely in love with people who build up their own systems of belief." *In Fragile Resistance*, David Thorpe draws upon modernist principles of object-making as a means to reference a totalitarian concept of aesthetics. His abstract form is defined by its own materiality: moulded plaster emanates a barbaric bone-like delicacy, entwined by a skin of strips of leather. *Fragile Resistance* plays a double role, as both object of contemplation and totem of desire.

## David Thorpe

I Am Golden

2002, Mixed  
Media Instal-  
lation  
Dimensions  
Variable



David Thorpe's sculptures evolved from his elaborate collaged paintings. They are increasingly concerned with using the physicality of materials to represent themselves. David Thorpe develops his sculptures to further explore the corporeality of his idea. Exchanging representation for actualisation, his sculptural work exists as artefacts plausibly plucked from his paintings and created in real-life. *I Am Golden* is Thorpe's first foray into 3-dimensions. David Thorpe's objects often merge formalist sculpture with functionality as a reiteration of the interconnectedness of ideology and lifestyle. In *I Am Golden*, mosaic tiled spheres form the basis of a miniature temple-like structure; the piece also doubles as a plant stand. By combining elements of real potted flowers with constructed decorative motifs, David Thorpe unites nature and artifice in a single utopian gesture.

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Smith, Roberta, David Thorpe,  
The New York Times, 16 December 2005.

## David Thorpe

303 Gallery  
525 West 22nd Street, Chelsea  
Through Thursday

An appealing sense of seriousness hangs over the work of the British artist David Thorpe, conveyed by his dilligent sense of craft, his eccentric use of materials and his mildly ironic allusions to the forces of history. In his first solo show in New York, he has taken the imagery of his meticulous cut-paper collages--eccentric monolithic structures in rugged landscapes that suggest an unusually well-financed commune--into three dimensions. The results alternate between the architectural and the votive, the modern and the primal.

Three large, portentously titled screens ("The Great Collaborator," for example) evoke the curtain walls of modern skyscrapers, except that they are made in dark wood and strained glass. One sculpture titled "The Great Conspirator" might be a model for a six-pointed building or a starship, but it also has a slightly sinister, robotic presence. It appears again as a levitating dwelling in a large collage that defines the landscape mostly with coarse bark and dried flowers. On an adjacent wall a poetic broadside begins "Howle, Howle, Ye Great Ones." Elsewhere a fragile hemisphere defined by two thin, perpendicular curves of wood held in tension by string might be a model, a primitive instrument (musical or scientific) or a ritual object.

Mr. Thorpe's work appears to mine the connection between English and American history while conflating the failed utopias and countercultures of the 19th and 20th centuries with references to science fiction, design, religion and exile. Its richness is palpable, but a little less hermeticism and more accessibility would go a long way.

ROBERTA SMITH

# frieze

82

## Call of the Wild

by Tom Morton

David Thorpe's collages, books and sculptures describe a fantasy separatist community in a fictional wilderness - images of loneliness entwined with the appeal of solitude

Almost everybody's had a Greta Garbo moment, a sudden, sharp-elbowed desire to be alone. When life harasses us or hurts us or fails to live up to our expectations, solitude provides solace, the opportunity to lick our wounds or tend to thoughts that, although they belong to us, have become thin and strange through neglect. And yet, for all our yearnings for splendid isolation, it is an impossible dream. "The way of the world, its interconnectedness and dangers, mean that to maintain our apartness

(or its pale copy) we must share it with others. Perhaps the best policy, then, is to take shelter among like minds and hearts. If those nearest to you think and feel as you do, reality clamours a little less, and (when the sun is shining or when you're lost in music) you may almost convince yourself that you live in a serene universe of one.

Not all of us can afford this fantasy. Diplomats can't (imagine the diplomatic incidents), nor can politicians, policemen, poets or anybody

whose life is lived in the force field of difference that fizzes and crackles between one person and another. It's pretty common, though, to want things we can't have, even though this wanting causes us pain. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem 'Fears in Solitude, Written in April 1798, During the Alarm of an Invasion' opens with a description of 'a green and silent spot' inhabited by a man (Coleridge himself?) who 'would full fain preserve/ His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel / For all



Left: *Evolution New* 2000-1 Mixed media collage 110x70cm Right: *Untitled (Armoured Petals)* 2004 Watercolour on paper 63x43cm

his human brethren'. Fearing a French invasion of Britain, he at first identifies it as divine retribution for the nation's 'vices': its blood-soaked empire-building, its liberty-inhibiting bureaucracy, its worship of wealth and war. We might almost read this list as a Romantic manifesto in negative, were it not for the protagonist's shift in gear half-way through the poem, when (having totted up the horrors an invasion might visit on Britain) he comes out in favour of tossing France's forces back into 'the insulated ocean' should they attack. It's tempting, of course, to interpret this as an example of the well-rehearsed political journey between dovishness and hawkishness, or even liberalism and conservatism, but that wouldn't be quite right. Rather, having implored the British to repent 'of the wrongs with which we stung/ So fierce a foe to frenzy', the protagonist returns to his verdant privacy, where he hopes, perhaps against hope, that his 'filial fears' will 'pass like the gust'. Coleridge's poem is, in the end, about how difficult it is to isolate oneself, to find peace on a peace-less planet.

If 'Fears in Solitude' speaks to contemporary geo-political vents (and it should), its protagonist's position speaks to the work of

David Thorpe, whose collages seem stuck on the horns of the world and its dilemmas, gouging themselves more deeply with every attempt they make to pull themselves off. Since 2000 Thorpe's work has been preoccupied with representing the architecture of a fantasy separatist community which inhabits a wilderness that, with its pines, peaks and vast skies, might be located in some epically unspoilt corner of North America. The buildings here hover somewhere between sci-fi slickness and the rough stuff of craft, resembling wooden rocket ships (*Life is Splendid*, 2000), five pointed-stars (*Evolution Now*, 2000-1) or pebble-dashed, all-seeing eyes (*House for Auto-Destiny*, *Imaginative Research*, 2000). Sometimes groups of tiny figures stand in front of these structures, holding hands or raising them heavenwards in what might be an act of worship or a well-regimented workout routine. Looking at these pieces, they appear steeped in Utopias and Utopian thought spaces, whether real or imagined, or claimed by left or right: the writing of Gerard Winstanley and William Morris, the American landscape as painted by the Hudson Bay School and the myth of Manifest Destiny, the Michigan Militia and

David Koresh's compound at Waco, the music of Sun Ra and the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, Bruce Goff and the Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Art, though, should always be more than a box in which to put a bunch of contrary objects or notions, and what's interesting about Thorpe's work isn't so much its theme (right now the concept of Utopia, in the art world at least, has all the buzz of a sleep-deprived wasp) as how that theme rubs up against the way his works are thought through and made.

Key here is Thorpe's method. Although in reproduction, or at a distance, his collages resemble paintings or pencil-crayoned drawings (they have featured in the surveys 'Edge of the Real: A Painting Show' at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, and 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions' at MoMA, New York, but never, oddly, in a show concerned with collage), when one gets up close and personal with them, they atomize into beautiful, painstakingly applied compilations of scalped paper, dried bark and flora, mass-produced jewellery, slate, modeller's wood,



Good People 2002 Mixed media collage 75x99cm

oxidized glass, net curtain, pebbles and Play-Doh. Thought about for a moment, the business of their making is very different from that of painting or drawing. There is no romance in collage, no semi-mystical relationship between mind and hand. Instead, the medium offers drab, farm- or factory-worker labour, with one's freedom restricted to how one reorders pre-existing fragments of reality, and what meanings one maps onto them. In this, and in its solitariness, Thorpe's practice echoes the central problem faced by the founders of separatist communities, namely that, however much one wants or needs to start over, the old world lingers like a tender, stubborn bruise.

While Thorpe's community is a fantasy, it's one that's curiously fuzzy at the edges. Although it has a logo (the pentagram) and a set of wistful, allusive hymns (published in the artist's 2003 book *A Rendezvous with My Friends of Liberty*), it has no name, and we're given little or no clue as to its belief system, customs, culture or political or economic structures. Compared with, say, J.R.R. Tolkien's encyclopaedically itemized Middle Earth, or even the *mise-en-scène* of the average Saturday morning cartoon,

Thorpe's Eden is low on believability-upping, Boy's Own-style detail. This lack of specifics, though, is important and holds out its own form of freedom. By never giving us a firm place to stand within his fiction, the artist allows us to recognize it as a fiction, not a space to retreat to but one in which we might worry away at real-world questions about art, the social contract and what it means to be alone. Perhaps the best example of this raggedy myth-making is 'The Colonist', a 2004 show at Tate Britain in which Thorpe's fantasy broke free of the bounds of the collaged two-dimensional surface and stepped, a little confused as to what it now was, into three-dimensional life.

Hung on the wall of Tate Britain's Art Now space, the collaged works in 'The Colonist' were heavy with fantasy architecture and grey, snow-full skies. In *History is Nothing, the World is Nothing, Our Love Can Make Us Clean* (2004) what might be a meeting-house or banqueting hall sits high in a mountain fastness, *Windowless*, it refuses to acknowledge anything beyond its own thick-timbered walls, just as it refuses to give away the secrets they conceal. Perhaps what lies behind the beams are objects

such as *Eternity and Resistance* (2004), a torpedo-shaped, leather-strapped sculpture-cum-buoyancy-aid-cum-mini-totem-pole, or *The White Brotherhood* (2004), a sloping, triangular construction of wood and glass sprigged with a sharp, bowed dowel that was somewhere between an architectural model, an objet d'art and a weapon, or even *The Protecting Army I-V* (2004), five dark wooden screens, set here and there with frosted windows, that divided up Thorpe's exhibition space, providing (importantly) points of entry and resistance, penetration and privacy.

The ambiguity of the objects, however, coupled with their knowingly provocative titles, makes them more than simply fantasy furniture or faux anthropological deposits. Rather, they're fraught clusters of material, fed up with life as it is and yet confused as to what they might like life to be. Perhaps, in the end, that's what most artworks are: appeals for purity, separateness and thinking space, laced with a fear of loneliness and a half-formed idea that, out there in the world, they might do something a lot like good.

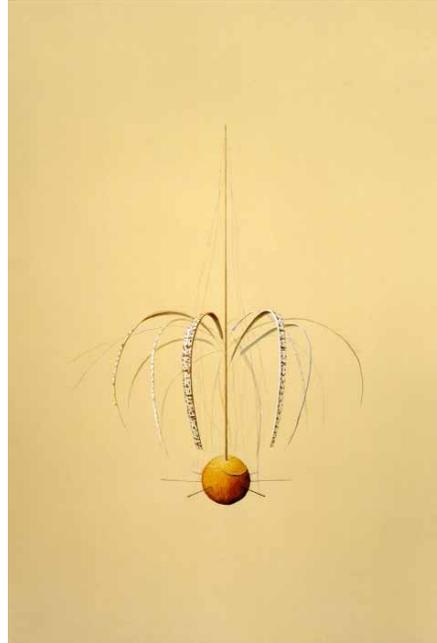
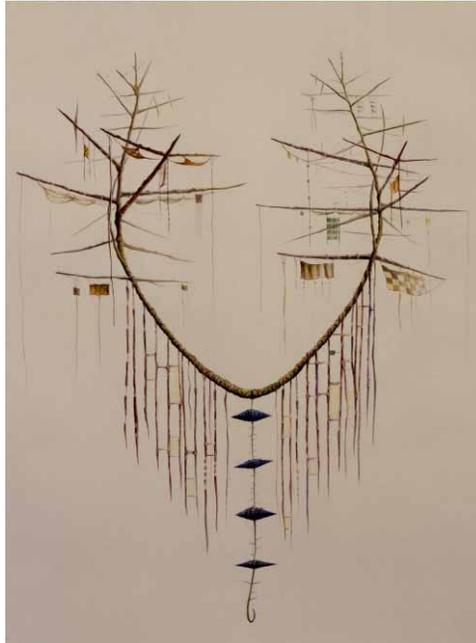
Tom Morton is a contributing editor of *frieze*, a writer and a curator.

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Williams, Eliza, David Thorpe,  
Flash Art, July 2005, p78.

## David Thorpe



**DAVID THORPE, *The Exiled Flower is Great Libertie*, 2005. Watercolor on paper, 85 x 65cm; *The Great Usurper*, 2005. Watercolor on paper, 124 x 87cm. Courtesy of Maureen Paley Interim Art.**

David Thorpe's works at Maureen Paley continue the artist's documentation of an imagined utopia, an alternative community possibly hidden in some remote backwater. The titles of the paintings suggest political militancy (*The Invincible General*, *A Dialogue with the Radicals*, *The Great Usurper*) however the content is, in contrast, almost folksy, as Thorpe depicts maypole dancers and imagery that conjures an old-fashioned England. A further contradiction lies in the immaculate rendering of the paintings, and in Thorpe's continued interest in architecture, echoing his earlier collage works of futuristic buildings lying deep in the woods. Here, architectural suggestions appear in almost all of the paintings, including the impressive botanical drawings, though no completed structures are evident. Alongside the paintings is a screen, the only sculptural work here, which reflects Thorpe's combined interest in techni-

cal perfection and craft ideals. Similarly to *Enclosure Pattern* (2005), a painting that could equally be an aerial view of the English countryside or the abstract patterning on a court jester's suit, the screen incorporates dark wood with beautiful glass to create an effect that is both mediaeval and modern. Only one painting suggests that the tenets of Thorpe's fantasy community may not all be positive. Styled as a ye olde poster, *You Are Nothing* (2005), proclaims "Ecstasy is here. Go! You are nothing. This world is not for you," suggesting at best a closed colony, or at worst a cult.

-- Eliza Williams

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET

NEW YORK NY 10001

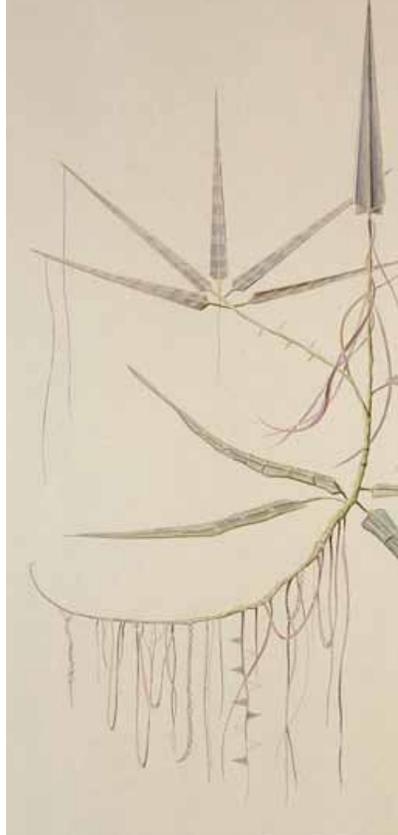
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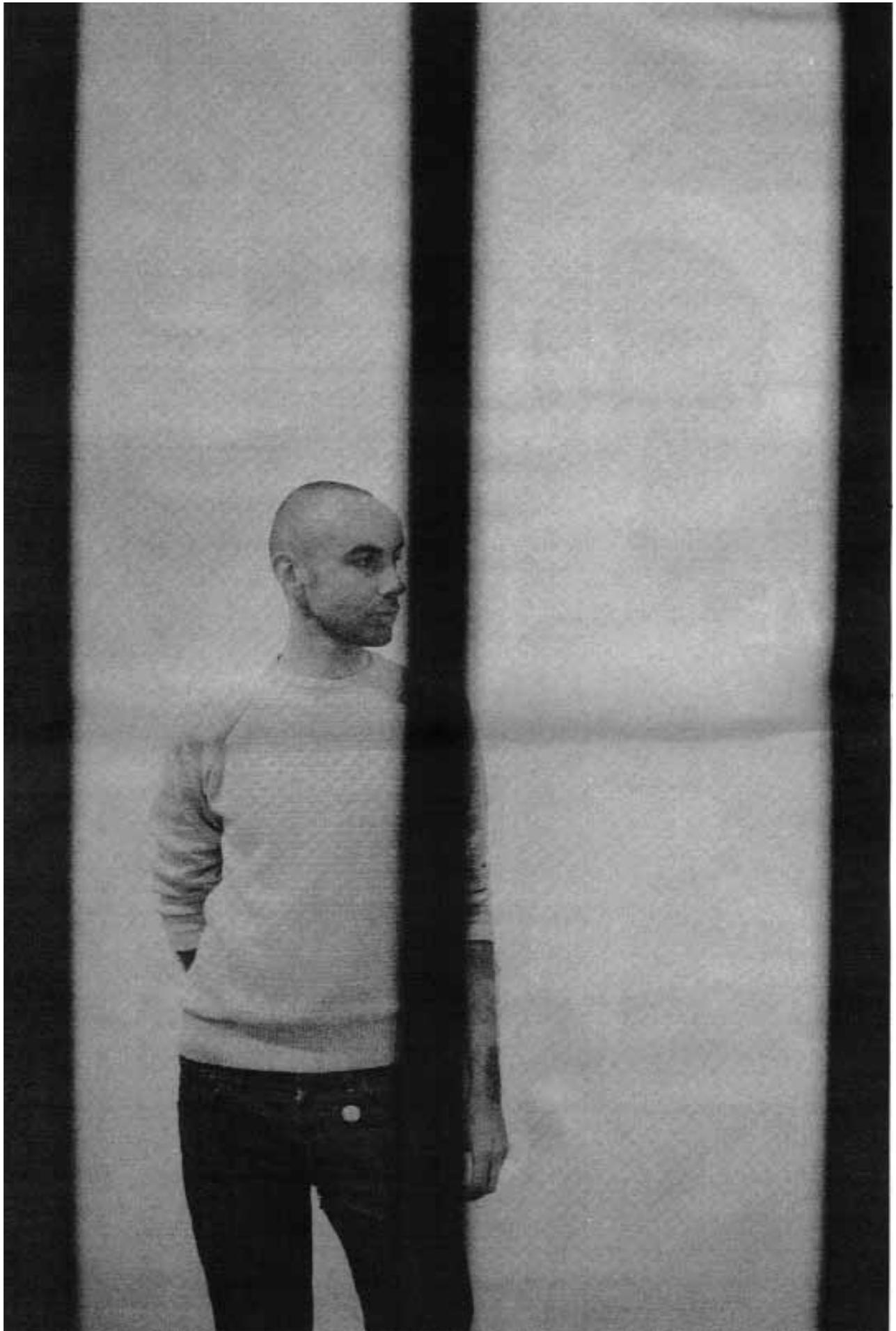
The Independent Magazine, 23 October 2004



## How to buy an exclusive edition of The Kingdom Spear (2004) by David Thorpe

THE INDEPENDENT Magazine has secured 10 copies of The Kingdom Spear (2004) by David Thorpe exclusively for readers at the guaranteed price of £340. The artwork is a hand-coloured, hard ground etching measuring 76 x 57cm. Published by Counter Editions, it is printed in a limited edition of 80 and is signed, numbered and dated by the artist. It is

also available framed (£500) in sapele (86 x 67cm). This edition is offered on a first-come first-served basis from today, Saturday 23 October. To buy The Kingdom Spear, telephone Counter Editions on 020-7684 8888, Monday to Saturday, 10am-6pm. Alternatively, you can order your etching by logging on to the website at [www.counter Editions.com](http://www.counter Editions.com)



CASEY KAPLAN  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Sweet, Matthew, *Outsider Art*.  
*The Independent Magazine*, 23 October 2004

David Thorpe is the star of the new show at Tate Britain--and the subject of our latest exclusive print offer (see page 38).

Interview by **Matthew Sweet**

Portrait by **Gautier Deblonde**

# Outsider Art

David Thorpe is in a paranoid world of his own. It might be somewhere in the far-flung future, or somewhere in a solar system just a short hop beyond our own. The terrain is wooded. The plant life is spiky and desiccated. The buildings seem to be made from timber, animal hide and stained glass. The style has a touch of native America, and a whisper of William Morris and Frank Lloyd Wright: architectural modernism as it might be pursued by a gang of survivalists hiding out in the hills of North Dakota. Nobody seems to live here. Except Thorpe, that is.

We're standing in the Art Now room at Tate Britain, which is currently occupied by the artist's show, *The Colonists*. A series of screens divides the space: chunky wooden constructions set with thick, ribbed, glass panels. Positioned in the hollows created by the screens is a collection of odd artefacts: a vase, a decorated wall-hanging, a circular painting depicting a teepee-like building constructed in a forest glade, object that might be architectural models, an image of a river blocked by a dam. The materials are eclectic: slate, wood, lead, bits of net curtain, costume jewellery, bark.

There are two attendants on the door. Only three visitors at a time are allowed into the space. Even under that restriction, careless art-gawkers have already bashed some of it about. One piece contains a length of wooden dowelling projecting beyond the plinth on which it sits: a punter crashed into it last week and pulled it from its moorings. Thorpe bends down to inspect the damage, lifts and refixes a length of sticky tape. "Most of the work in this room," he says, "is held together by glue and string and good will." He gives me a guided tour of the settlement, "It's a community on the rocks," he explains. "They're just holding on." Who lives here, exactly? "I think the community is of one. It's me."

People who threw it all in and went back to the land fascinate Thorpe. He talks, with breathless enthusiasm, about the society described in William Morris's utopian romance, *News from Nowhere* (1892). ("It's curious," he says, "how Morris is now known primarily for being a pre-

cursor to Laura Ashley. But in *News from Nowhere* he's describing a society that's established after a brutal socialist revolution.") Others who attempted to picture or create alternative societies jostle in his conversation: the Diggers, the Levellers, the Fifth Monarchists, the Rev Jim Jones and his People's Temple ("all very interesting until the incident with the Kool-Aid," he says, referring to the group's mass-suicide using the drink laced with cyanide) and the American performance artist and self-avowed extra-terrestrial emissary, Sun Ra. Even Tom and Barbara Good (of *The Good Life*) have a special place in Thorpe's thoughts, though he, like me, suspects that their experiment in self-sufficiency was fatally flawed by their parasitic relationship with Margo and Jerry. He's also intrigued by the architect Frederick Kiesler, who filled his notebooks with bizarre scribbles and drove himself insane attempting to design an "endless house"--a living unit which would use none of the traditional architectural forms.

"How do you protect yourself and survive? I have sympathy with people who struggle with questions like that. People who say, 'Fuck the world, it's doomed, I'm getting out,' and try to survive in a kind of Robinson Crusoe colony." While Thorpe has little in common politically with these groups--lots of them, he concedes, like living underground surrounded by their collections of pump-action shotguns--he has been affected by some of their obsessions. "I find myself listening to a lot of early folk music," he confesses. "Five years ago I couldn't stand it. I'm not sure if I like it now, but it seems to fit in. You're always trying to form a coherent world but it's always shifting..."

Thorpe is part of the post-YBA generation of British artists: born in 1972, he is old enough to have exhibited his work at City Racing, young enough to have been at art school after Tracey and Damien became a big noise in the papers. Like several of his contemporaries--the painter Nigel Cooke, for example--he has rejected the flamboyance of the previous generation in favour of a kind of neurotic meticulousness. After the YBA party, it's time, it seems, to knuckle down to some hard work.

# COLONY CLUB

Below: Thorpe's 'The White Brotherhood'  
(2004) from The Colonists show at Tate  
Britain

He grew up in Welling, a community marooned on the borders of Kent and south-east London, the son of a dock worker and a secretary, both now retired. His art education was pursued first at Chelsea, then at Hull. Hull, he thinks, was a bit of a mistake. He once went to a very good party in the city, and on the basis of this experience, applied to the local art college. His second mistake was his decision to rent a flat in the wilderness of East Hull. His third was trolling down to his local, ordering a glass of Pimm's and lemonade, and finding himself taking part in a re-enactment of the pub scene from *An American Werewolf in London*. "It all went quiet and the barman leaned over and said, 'Do you know, sir, that is a woman's drink?' I remember my legs buckling under me." Although he claims not to have seen a tree during his three years on Humberside, the low cost of living in the city allowed him to return to London without a penny of debt. Back home, he enrolled on the postgraduate course at Goldsmiths' College--alma mater of the majority of the YBAs--lived as cheaply as he could and began to make art according to his means. Collages were his thing: architectural fantasies snipped from coloured card. One of his tutors, the painter Martin Maloney, gave him his first big break when he included several of Thorpe's pieces in the 1997 ICA show, *Die Young Stay Pretty*. "The scale of the early cut-outs developed as I got bigger tables," Thorpe recalls. "The last big one I did was the size of my bedroom floor."



Today he can afford to work on a bigger scale, though his attachment to modest dimensions and inexpensive materials remains deep. A notable exception is the group of wooden screens employed in *The Colonists*. Someone else, he admits, suffered to make this element of his art. The carpenter who prepared the timber used to build the screens sliced off three fingers with a circular saw blade while engaged on the job. Unfortunately, the accident occurred at 7:30am in a German art school which had taken all its telephones offline for repair. The cleaner to whom the carpenter ran, bleeding, had a new mobile phone which she didn't know how to work. By the time he got to hospital, the doctors concluded that it

would be possible to restore his middle finger, but impossible to fix it sufficiently to allow him to bend it. Rather than condemning himself to a lifetime of making an obscene gesture, he opted for them to toss it into the scrag bucket. "I met him and I expected it to be terrible," says Thorpe, with an air of gentle bemusement, "but people told me that he'd never been in such a good mood. He's not the best looking man, and since the accident he's got this young new wife who's a fashion stylist. Where he met her I don't know."

Whether the mutilated carpenter would share Thorpe's Ruskinian enthusiasm for labour, I'm not sure. But the meeting point between Utopian idealism and practical reality is one of the artist's principal interest. "In *News from Nowhere* there's no central authority," he reflects. "There's a remarkable reasonableness about everyone's lives. If someone sees a hole in the road, they just fill it in and regard it as an opportunity to build up their muscles, to have a workout." He chuckles at the idea. "That's why a lot of these experimental communities failed. All these 19th-century intellectuals didn't realize that they were letting themselves in for a life of hard labour. Getting up at four o'clock in the morning to milk the sheep must have come as a bit of a shock to the system."

Art has allowed Thorpe to pursue his own quiet form of separatism. "Making art in your studio, hiding away, is a great excuse for self-indulgence," he muses. "It's a wonderful life, potentially. Even when I was on the dole and making work in my room, it was infinitely preferable to going out and getting a job and giving my labour to somebody else. Just through the act of making art, joy comes to you. It's almost a religious experience."

David Thorpe's exhibition, *The Colonists*, continues at Art Now, Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1 (020-7887 8000; [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)), until 14 November

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

meyer riegger,

Klauprechtstraße 22, 76137 Karlsruhe  
t +49 (0)721 821292, f +49 (0)721 9822141  
info@meyer.riegger.de. www.meyer.riegger.de

David Thorpe

“The Colonists”

04.04.2004 - 15.05.2004

We are pleased to announce the first German solo exhibition of the British artist David Thorpe. His works have recently been seen in the group shows “Drawing Now” at MoMA Queens, New York and “futureland” at Abteibergmuseum Monchengladbach.

David Thorpe is well-known for his intricate relief-like collages, which formerly were made from cut-out paper, but have now evolved to include material that are inherent to their subjects such as bark, pressed plants and flowers, leather, chains, fabric, wire, glass and wool. Their refinements are just recognizable from the closest distance. The collages suggest a narration of romantic landscapes and futuristic buildings, of a world where everything is possible, where the past and future exist at the same time.

David Thorpe compares his work as an artist in his studio with the task of a king in his kingdom which is always under threat. The exhibition is the battlefield and the outside world the uncontrollable enemy. The title of the exhibition “The Colonists” refers to a construction of a self-made kingdom, to the process of conquering selfsufficiency. The collages and objects, that are developed especially for the exhibition symbolize Utopia, a vision that is to be defended. They produce an ambivalent atmosphere, which evokes physical and psychological paranoia on the one hand, a vision of liberty on the other. The screens “The Protecting Army” function as a kind of guardians. Their paranoid effect, reminiscent of gothic design, builds up protecting, almost aggressive barriers against an attack towards his mental vision.

Installed like a labyrinth they make the physical and psychological access more difficult but lead to new points of view. Some of the collages refer with their shape and material to the objects and the objects seem to hint at the architectural elements within the collages. The borders are transparent. The collages and the structured screens move continually between two and three dimensions, between macro and micro.

## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Wood, Catherine, David Thorpe: Meyer Riegger Karlsruhe.  
*Frieze*, N° 84 June July August 2004

### David Thorpe

#### Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe

In a recent text David Thorpe described the artist's aim using an extended metaphor of military defence strategy. For this show, 'The Colonists', the gallery's clean white rooms were cut up by intersecting mahogany screens, inset with thickly textured glass, which stood guard across its shopfront windows, obscuring visibility from the street.

The protected world within this ornamental fortress--itself embedded in the Karlsruhe landscape, with its

surrounding forest of dark fir spires--is, however, intricate and generous. The fine detail of Thorpe's exquisitely constructed universe intimates love rather than the dull, earnest labour of some handmade figuration. The thickened surface of his collages militates against the easy consumption offered by Pop cultural images.

In Thorpe's earlier land- and cityscapes human scale is dwarfed by vast environment, implying an exaggeratedly diminished viewpoint. His third exhibition at Maureen Paley Interim Art, London in 2002 introduced new dimensions of sculpture and text into the work, but the current show marks a significant step

in the resolution of Thorpe's project: from gazing up towards a world of being inside it.

There was a sense of physical immersion in the artist's world in 'The Colonists', but it did not derive from theatricality. Thorpe's dense configuration of objects, models, screens, and pictures criss-crossed pathways and shifts in scale revealed worlds within worlds. The round frame of *The Colonist* (all works 2004), a window-view landscape of a fortified wooden building set in an ethereal forest, is accented by a curved oak bow, *The Axe Cuts the Root*, threaded with found trinkets, which in turn serves as a blueprint

for the shallow arched geology of the dam in *The Axe Loid on the Root*. History is Nothing the World is Nothing Our Love Can Make Us Clean is a snowscape built with a double depth of receding line and texture; from a topography of leather, bark and pressed flowers to a watercolour and tissue paper sky. The building in the picture is adorned with a cheap metal necklace that jars with the organic matter to charge the piece with a thrill of curious metaphysical transmutation.

The installation is earthed by botanical drawings of armour-plated and star-petalled flowers: living specimens grown from the artist's vision.

Thorpe's work proposes a notion of cultivation with a corrupt etymology, one that yokes cult and culture to tangle conservatism and dark criticality. The portcullis-cum-trellises of the screened space mark out, with deliberate ambivalence, the artist's isolated dominion. The artist treads dangerously--and knowingly (titles include *The White Brotherhood* and *The Kingdom of Seekers*)--close to an analogy with the forest as protected domain: an archetypal primordial myth invoked by the Nazis with recourse to ancient Roman histories, or by 19th-century preachers believing in their divine right to the sequoia 'cathedrals' of the North American landscape.

There is an aggressive undertow in the work that reflects on Modernism's claim of apolitical autonomy. References to traditions of Western art are insistent and specific--tondo, triptych, plinth--while also being twisted to the triangles or pentangles of pagan symbolism. The geometric underpinning of his universe is quite distinct from early 20th-century attempts to discover the essence of pure shapes in the natural world, in Piet Mondrian's transition to abstraction, for example. Thorpe's artistic vision has begun to devour itself from within, growing mutated

forms through excessive, enclosed self-sufficiency.

The romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or Albert Bierstadt are often cited as referents for Thorpe's work. But where their contemporary Thomas Cole's *The Cross in the Wilderness* (1844) represents what Simon Schama has characterized as the 'depetrification' of the Christian symbol--green shoots sprouting from its stone to signify hope and resurrection--Thorpe has come to invest in a conscious deadness. His focus on natural landscapes, plants and trees is at productive odds with the layers of paper, dried vegetation, slate and opaque glass that have, in recent years, given his pictures an increasingly armoured, petrified feel.

Thorpe creates a world that is deliberately brittle, tinder dry. But its dead quality does not imply straightforward pessimism. The intricate craft of his making, coupled with this choice of materials, suggests the work as a kind of kindling. A triangular wood and glass lean-to construction at the centre of the show contains primitive stick-and-groove technology used to make fire. Its angular, mirrored shards dress it alternatively as a spacecraft. Like this model, Thorpe's configuration



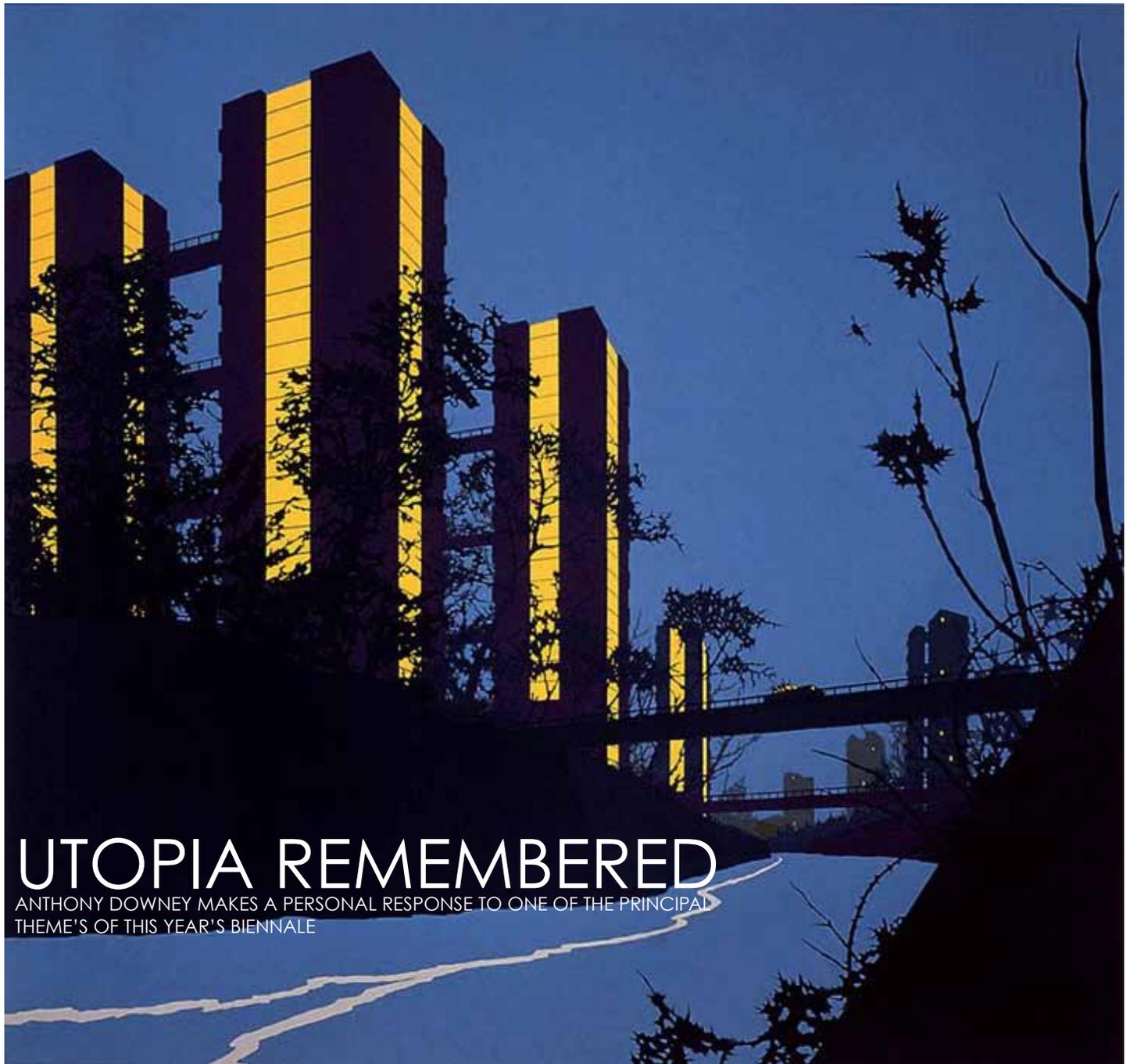
David Thorpe, *The Colonist*, 2004, Mixed media, -83cm diameter

of works register a struggle to reconcile material existence with a drive towards transcendent obliteration; to catch, and be consumed by, fire.

**Catherine Wood**

CASEY KAPLAN  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Downey, Anthony, *Utopia Remembered*.  
Contemporary, N° 51, June 2003



# UTOPIA REMEMBERED

ANTHONY DOWNEY MAKES A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL  
THEME'S OF THIS YEAR'S BIENNALE

'Our business here is to be Utopian, to make vivid and credible if we can, first this facet and then that, of an imaginary whole and happy world. Our deliberate intention is to be not, indeed, impossible, but most distinctly impracticable, by every scale that reaches between today and tomorrow.' HG Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (1905)

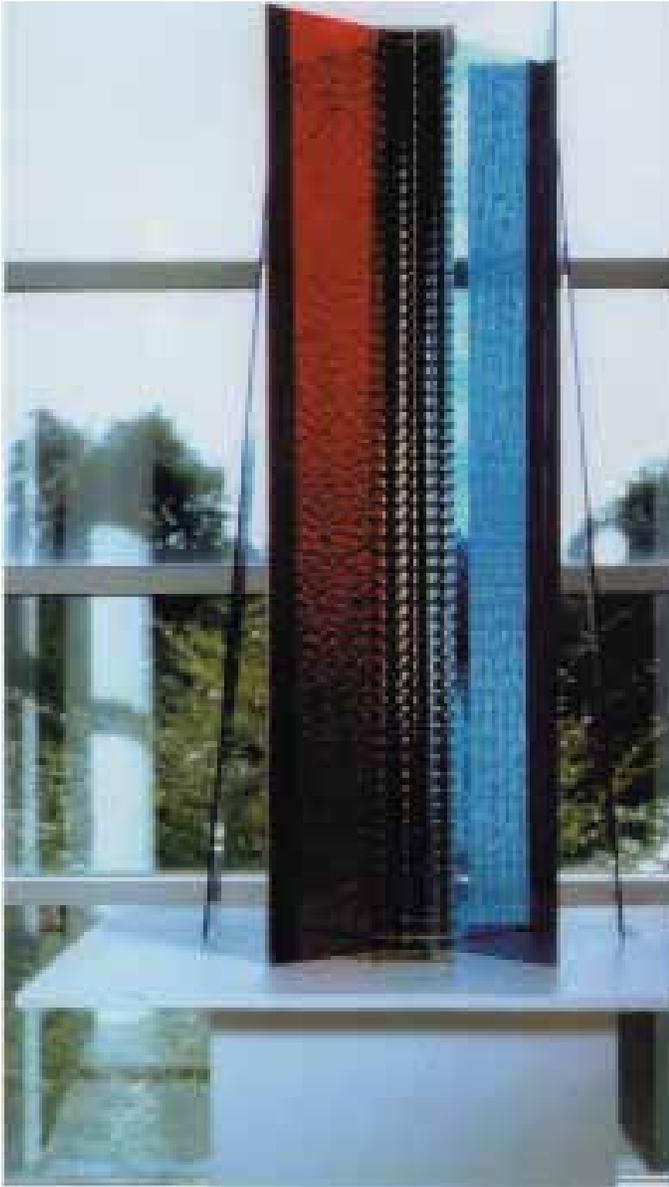
First envisioned by Thomas Moore in 1516, the notion of utopia has been a paradox of sorts from the outset. Written in two parts, the first installment of Moore's *Utopia* recounted what he considered the political and social ills of sixteenth-century England; the second part, on the other hand, offered a corrective in the form of an island called Utopia. Moore's proposed ideal island state is not, however, as straightforward as it may first appear and leaves us with the following paradox: does the litany of inequities reported in part one serve as a summons to establish the idealised conditions of the island state of the second part, or, more mischievously, is part two an elaborate parody of the unfeasibility of the very notion of utopia? Playing upon the linguistic ambiguity to be found in the term itself -- ou-topia (no-place) and eu-topia (a good place)--Moore would appear to be taunting us with a possible future that is in practice unobtainable: the deferral of utopia, in fact, would appear to be the predicate that underwrites its very possibility.

Whatever Moore's intentions in writing *Utopia*, and they are of course more complicated than I have suggested here, it is beyond debate that on an ideological and conceptual level, the ideal was taken up by many who saw in it the expression of a possible, more preferable future; an exemplary model that would act as an antidote to the degeneration, decadence and decline around them.

Utopia, of course, has always been closely linked to, if not intrinsically dependent upon, a nominal dystopia. To this end, the ideological motives that governed and ordered the twentieth century became closely associated not only with a progressivist notion of history but with the fatal rise of Fascism in Europe and Stalinism in Russia, resulting in the horrors of the last world war, the Holocaust and the Gulags. The mis-placed idealism associated with utopia, it would seem, has an inherent tendency towards totalitarianism, hubristic recklessness and intolerance--not forgetting, of course, that Utopia was an island established as much upon the notion of exclusion as inclusion and a distinctly delineated social order. Freedoms, offered generously at the outset, are often translated into a series of restrictions and prohibitions on Moore's ideal island state; one of the text's many, perhaps intentional, inconsistencies.

However, we are now not only living in a 'post-modern' world where the grand narratives of the last century are no longer tenable, but, we are assured, in a 'post-utopian' moment. Notwithstanding the contemporary disdain for the idealism that once underwrote utopian models of the future--and in some ways because of it--over the last decade or so a trend has emerged in contemporary art practice that is preoccupied with models of utopia and the ideals that underwrite them.

This has been a decade, it should be noted, which has not been without its political and economic problems. It is no coincidence that the tendency towards utopian idealism was, and continues to be, more aggressively pursued in times of oncoming or actual social, political and



Isa Genzken, *New Buildings for Berlin*, 2002, two-piece work, glass, mirror, foil.  
Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz



throughout Isa Genzken's diverse output, she deliberately returns us to the concerns of movements such as Constructivism

economic instability. Le Corbusier in the aftermath of World War I and the Bauhaus in the run-up to the rise of National Socialism could both be seen as examples of this inclination in architectural and design terms. It is also no coincidence that at the very moment World War II was unravelling the historical continuum which endorsed the

progressivist notion of history associated with utopianism, artists in New York were establishing a movement that for many exemplified a form of individualism closely associated with spiritual redemption and enlightenment. Furthermore, this same movement was aggressively promoted throughout the early years of the Cold War. Add to this the

fact that the avant-garde search for ‘something new’ has always displayed much of the progressivist idealism associated with utopianism, and it is not difficult to argue that idealist abstractions, the mainstay of utopian extrapolations per se, have long been a latent feature of modern art practice.

This trend, of course, has much to do with the crossover between art, architecture and design. In Russia, the Constructivists proposed buildings and living environments that explicitly referenced utopian ideals of a rationalised environment. Later, Constant Nieuwenhuys set out on a project--New Babylon--that was not only to occupy him from the fifties until the mid-seventies, but which outlined a nomadic approach that has subsequently come to define contemporary architectural practice. It was, naturally, apposite that Constant should have occupied the floor directly above Isa Genzken and Bodys Isek Kingelez in last year’s Documenta 11. In the work of the latter we are treated to the artist’s singular, not to mention eccentric, visions of futuristic, Ultra-modernist African cities--a prescriptive response, perhaps, to Frantz Fanon’s cautionary invocation of the historical ‘belatedness’ and methodical underdevelopment wrought by colonisation in Africa and elsewhere. These futuristic simulacra, moreover, outline a critique of the very idealism that supports--both metaphorically and literally--such edifices. Can the cities of the future really resemble places such as Kinshasa in the 3rd Millennium (1997) or Bodystate (1999), where, in this second work at least, Kingelez has inscribed his own being into the very fabric of the city. Like Thomas Moore before him, Kingelez would seem to be holding out the prospect of a utopian state only to critique its impractical and ultimately unobtainable nature.

Throughout Isa Genzken’s diverse output, she deliberately returns us to the concerns of movements such as Constructivism. Made of glass, tape, mirror and foil, Genzken’s New Buildings for Berlin (2001-02) explicitly refer to Mies van der Rohe’s Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper (1921) and his Glass Skyscraper (1922); both of which, tellingly, remained unbuilt. While Genzken’s work addresses a number of interrelated issues, New Buildings for Berlin--resembling as they do actual architectural models--recall a possible future that was ultimately deferred, and it is difficult not to be reminded of the way in which the radical energy of van der Rohe was to be dissipated a few short decades later, losing out ultimately to the conservatism, not to mention megalomaniacal hubris, that saw Adolf Hitler give free rein to Albert Speer’s monumental (and largely unbuilt or subsequently destroyed) visions for the same city.

In the work of Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa there is a similar highlighting of the projects of the past that were left unrealised or unfinished for one reason or another. In *Continuity of a Detached Architecture* (2002), Garaicoa digitally transformed unfinished ruins into ‘finished’, computer-generated buildings. Again, there is an aspiration here to address both the hubristic and yet necessary energy that produced a vision of an unrealised, and perhaps unrealisable, future.

For Yona Friedman, born in 1923, the very notion of unfeasibility, not least in the impracticality of his own projects, would seem to be the very spur that drove them on. Concerned with the concept of motion and transformation--mainstays in any discussion of Modernism--these projects include *Moveable Boxes* (1949) and *Manuals for the Self-Planner* (1973). Established in the early 1980s, Friedman’s Communication Centre of Scientific Knowledge for Self Reliance would seem a direct precursor to more recent projects such as Atelier van Lieshout’s sprawling studio outlet in Rotterdam, where a collective of technicians, engineers and artists produce products such as *Modular Multi Women Bed* (1997), mobile homes for those of us who actually appreciate the instructions that come with IKEA flat-packs, and *Compost Toilet* (2001). In 2001, AVL remodelled shipping containers into an operating theatre, an alcohol distillery, and--somewhat quaintly in retrospect--a bomb and firearm production



Yona Friedman, Structures Serving the Unpredictable  
top: Villa Spatiale above railroad track, 1958-62  
middle: Villa Spatiale above existing buildings, c. 1957  
below: Models of do-it-yourself chairs based on the principle of ‘Space Chain’  
Photo: Tom Haartsen. Courtesy: Netherlands Architecture Institute

line. Although professing that AVL is not a utopian project, in a recent interview Joep van Lieshout suggested that the starting point for AVL was predicated upon it being sealed off from the rest of the city; a ‘free state’ in all but legal designation. There are comparisons here to be had not only with Moore’s island state, and, more recently, with William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), which advocated not only egalitarianism but a quasi-anarchistic image of the future where self-sufficiency would be the order of the day.

What becomes increasingly provocative in discussions of the

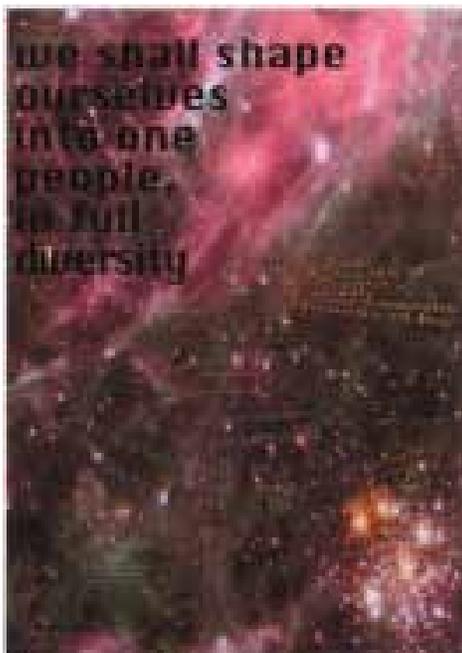


Paul Winstanley, VII 12, oil on linen. Courtesy: Maureen Paley / Interim Art, London

## the modernist rationalisation of space is laid bare by the appearance of what may be a slightly frayed curtain

relationship between current art practices and utopianism is the distinction here between those artists and collectives that actively set out to re-envision utopian projections of the future and those who harbour a (post)millennial nostalgia of sorts for the promises that utopian concepts once held out as practicable; both tendencies being, of course, complementary. In Paul Winstanley's paintings, for example, we see evidence of both. In Walter Gropius' *Balcony* (2002) the artist has taken a 1930s concrete house, hidden away in leafy Hampstead, and depicted its state of ongoing dilapidation. Designed by Walter Gropius—an architect who played no small part in influencing the trajectory of the utopian idealism associated both with modernist architecture and the ensuing rash of high-rise buildings spawned

by such idealism—the symbolism of this edifice's current decrepitude could not be more apposite. In other images, the modernist rationalisation of space is laid bare by the appearance of what may be a slightly frayed curtain, or the penumbra of dust coagulating in a once well-kept corner while the depopulated, sterile interiors of Winstanley's paintings indicate a concern with the compromised project of Modernism, they also exude a sense of wistfulness for a time when these interiors were seen as the apex of refinement and progress—a nostalgic sense of utopia remembered. A similar nostalgia can be found in David Thorpe's collages, where we are vigorously presented with an unmistakable utopian longing for a



Valencia Biennial in Spain. Although professing Utopia Station to be a 'no-place', the organisers see this particular platform as a catalyst for extensive discussions around the need for 'hope for [a] better future' confirmation, if any was needed, that utopia is not as 'post' as some would have us believe, nor will it be as long as conflict, fear, repression and prejudice are features of the world in which we live.

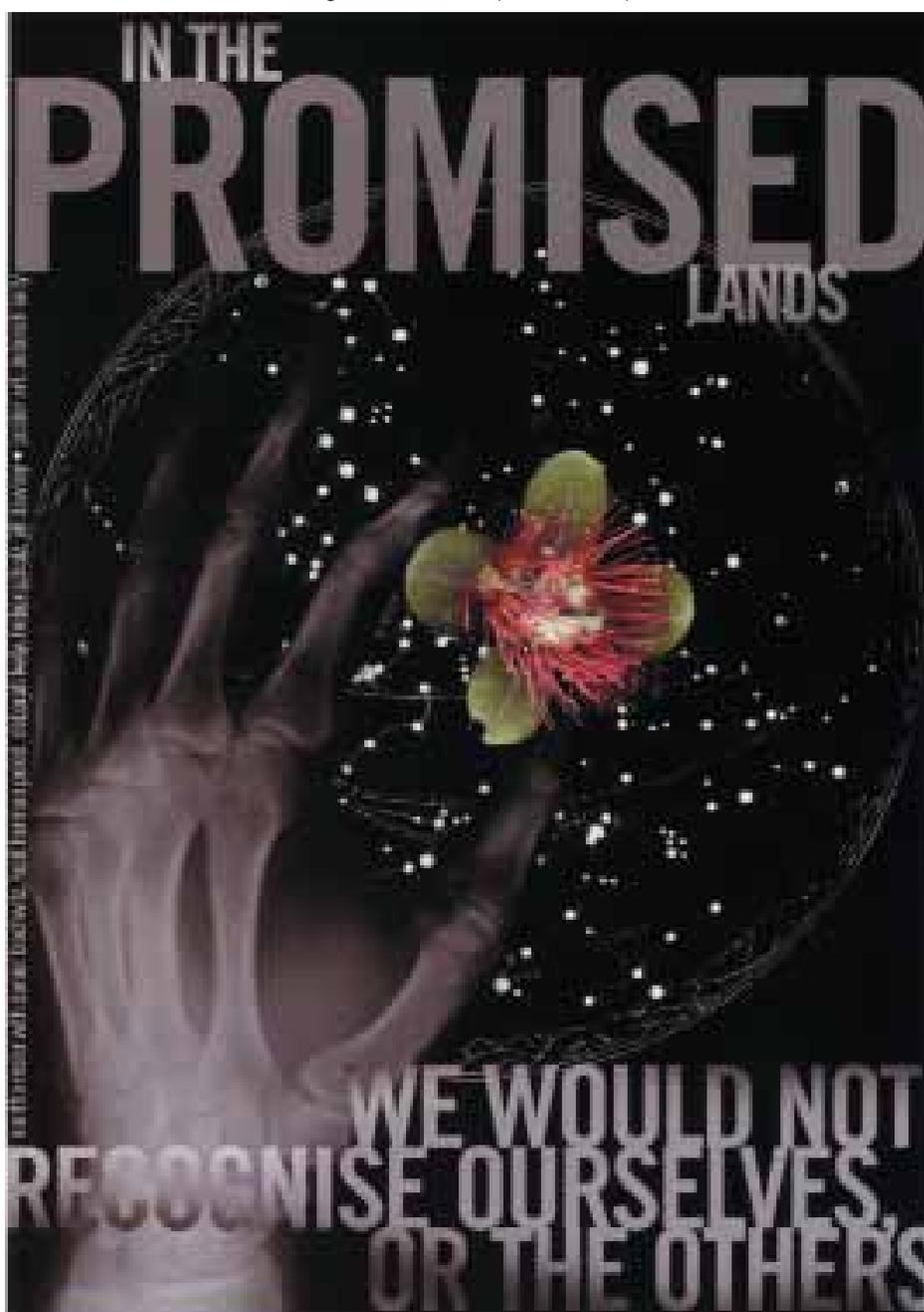
Utopia Station at the Venice Biennale is one element of an evolving project which began in February, and will include an additional two-

part showing at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, 21 September - 7 December 2003, with the second part scheduled for autumn 2004. Micro-UTOPIAS: Art & Architecture, curated by Francisco Jarauta and Jean Louis Maubant, will form part of the Valencia Biennial, Spain, 6 June - 30 September 2003. ANTHONY DOWNEY IS CURRENTLY COMPLETING HIS PHD AT GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, LONDON, AND IS THE PROGRAMME DIRECTOR ON THE PART-TIME MA (CONTEMPORARY ART) AT SOTHEBY'S INSTITUTE, LONDON

both images: Martha Rosler, posters for Utopia Station, Venice Biennale, 2003

project left unfinished. In *Forever* (1998), skyscrapers dominate not only the skyline, but the nature that lies prone before it. Unapologetically utopian in outlook, Thorpe envisions the 'world as a wondrous place filled with spectacular lives and spectacular views', a world, moreover, where everything is possible and 'we can transcend all limitations'.

To the extent that Thorpe is aware of the path that such hubris has recently taken us down--and I am in no doubt that he is--these images engage us in the questions implicit at the outset of this article. Where, if anywhere, has the energy that was once spent on utopian idealism been redirected? What happens to art as a practice when the trajectory of history is no longer defined in the teleological terms of utopian idealism? What exactly has come to replace the ideals that underwrote our last century? And finally, are we to accept a form of dystopia as the guiding principle of our possible futures, or, perhaps less negatively, develop a form of utopianism that maintains some of the dynamic energy of the concept, albeit contradictory, of utopic ambitiousness and visionary excess? While much of the twentieth century would seem to confirm the usurpation of utopianism, this has not necessarily led to a rejection of the speculative idealism associated with it. That this critical engagement is far from finished--and what could be more utopian than to say we have the final word on any matter--is further evidenced in the development of Utopia Station (conceived by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija) for this year's Venice Biennale, and the simultaneous inclusion of micro-UTOPIAS: Art & Architecture in the



## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Gronlund, Melissa, New York: MOMA QNS,  
Contemporary, Issue 47/48,2003, p119-120.

## NEW YORK: MOMA QNS

DRAWING NOW: EIGHT PROPOSITIONS

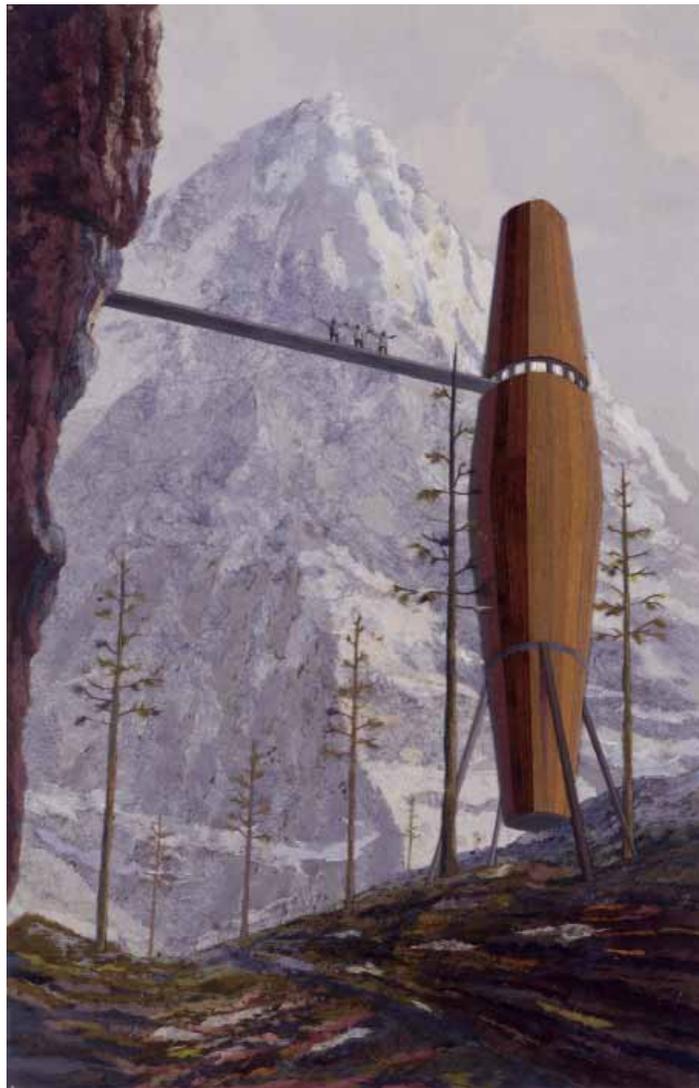
17 October 2002 - 6 January 2003

[www.moma.org/momaqns](http://www.moma.org/momaqns)

The Museum of Modern Art's energetic, excellent Drawing Now: Eight Propositions exhibition brought together some of the best (and trendiest) young artists in a compelling curatorial argument. Curator Laura Hoptman, previously at MoMA and now chief curator at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, contends that while in the seventies 'drawing' was a verb, with artists like Stella and Newman drawing as a means to illustrate the artistic process, it should now be understood as a noun: drawing as an end in itself. The works on paper here, produced from the nineties to the present, were largely communicative--descriptive, narrative, socially or politically engaged--and representational.

The show was five years in the making, and the wide range of artists illustrated that ambition: an exhibition to signal a change from self-reflection to depiction. Unlike the museum's millennial Modern Starts, which loudly sought to refigure art history by organising its collection along themes, Drawing Now was notably unpretentious; in part because drawing is often seen as an also-ran among genres, but also because the works on view here deliberately drew from popular art or commercial sources, such as cartoons, illustration, and architectural renderings.

Hoptman organised the exhibition into eight 'propositions', which aimed to codify the ends to which artists are drawing. Categories ranged from 'fashion, likeness, and allegory' (which was essentially portraiture, with Elizabeth Peyton, Graham Little, and the always disturbing John Currin), to themes like 'cosmogonies' and 'ornament'. 'Popular culture and national culture' showed artists inspired by regional tradition--like the Swedish artist Jockum Nordstrom's folk art-esque oddball collages and the German Kai Althoff's watercolours with their dark Northern Renaissance palette--and those using vernacular imagery to lampoon cultural stereotypes, like Kara Walkers booklet of the antebellum South, and Shahzia Sikanders Persian miniatures of veiled



David Thorpe, *Life is Splendid*, 2000, paper collage, 81 x 54 cm. Collection Laura Steinberg and B. Nadal-Ginard,  
Courtesy: Maureen Paley / Interim Art, London

women holding guns and U.S. dollar bills. Grouped under 'dystopia', the outstanding East German-born Neo Rauch showed his retrofuturist fantasies: campy figures, drawn in the style of Socialist Realist propaganda, hard at work at some unintelligible task. Part M C Escher, part Le Corbusier, the British artist Paul Noble created sprawling pencil renderings of a decrepit utopia with crumbling slums and a hospital about to pitch forward. Chris Ofili offered witty takes on the seventies with works like the Milton Glaser-like Albinos and Bros with Fros (1999), composed of faces with black Afros (Bros)

and faces with only an Afro-outline (Albinos). The show was also heavily weighted towards architecture, following the current trend of conflating the two genres. Kevin Appel and Toba Khedoori drew renderings, while, on entering, viewers were greeted by a wall drawing of a prototypical prison by Los Carpinteros. The Cuban collective conceived of the jail as a giant chest of drawers (with actual wooden knobs), putting a final spin on the word 'drawing'.

MELISSA GRONLUND

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Pollack, Barbara, Drawing Now: Eight Propositions.

Art Monthly, February 2003

■ Drawing Now: Eight Propositions

Museum of Modern Art New York  
October 17 to January 6

At first glance, 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions' is an ambitious survey of the somewhat unwieldy art scene of the 90s, encompassing a range of trends and styles that are in no way limited to works on paper. A distinct improvement over MoMA's last review of contemporary art, 'An International Survey of Painting and Sculpture' curated by Kynaston McShine in 1984, 'Drawing Now' features far fewer artists (26) but manages to achieve far greater diversity (gender, race, and nationality). Sheer statistics aside, 'Drawing Now' exalts a certain democratic vein of contemporary art, allowing artists with varied, and at times opposing, agendas equal footing - which does not mean that the exhibition did not have an agenda of its own.

Laura Hoptman, who curated the show before assuming her current post as organiser of the 2004 Carnegie International, puts her finger on an often overlooked aspect of contemporary art-making, that is that artists have moved beyond not only modernist notions of the artist's touch, but also the more strident premises of 70s process art. By choosing artists, such as Shazia Sikander, Matthew Ritchie, Toba Khedoori, Chris Ofili and Franz Ackerman, who apparently have little in common, Hoptman hits on a new commonality: a self-conscious approach to paper as a material. These artists integrate references to encounters with the page--from architectural plans to fashion layouts to comic strips--without relying on the corny charcoal smears or Japanese brushstrokes the public love to call drawings.

Organised along eight broadly construed themes Science and Art, Ornament, Architectural Drafting, Visionary Architecture, Cosmogonies, Vernacular Illustration, Comics and Animation, and Fashion and Likeness--the exhibition makes no claims to being a comprehensive survey. Abstraction is entirely missing as are text-based works, leaving an emphasis on figuration and landscape. Even so, more edgy influences, such as pornography and graffiti, are also surprisingly absent. Still, Hoptman uses this show as an opportunity to display works by a range of artists who would otherwise be hard to imagine hanging on the walls of the Museum of Modern Art.

David Thorpe's painfully constructed science fiction scenes, made from layers of minuscule cut-paper bits, or Paul Noble's mammoth post-nuclear landscapes are obsessive enough to rank with the best of Outsider Art. Ofili, Sikander, Kara Walker, Julie Mehretu and the collective Los Carpinteros--outsiders of another sort--are given enough room to show off as individuals, rather than cultural ambassadors. Visionaries abound, from Ackerman's surrealistic cities to Ritchie's Tolkienesque fairy tales or John Currin's idealized bimbo-hobos. Yet, by restricting the show to works on paper, too many artists who draw by less conventional means are left out. To make sure that the show lives up to the 'Now' of its title, Hoptman would surely have

to have included animators (such as William Kentridge) as well as scores of digital artists who have retired their pencils for a stylus and a mouse.

Inadvertently, by emphasizing narrative over process, Hoptman has selected a group of artists whose primary commonality is an emphasis on craft. Now, craft is not a bad thing, but, you need much more than an obsessive attention to detail to overturn the 20th-century canon as the formidable works in the upcoming 'Matisse/ Picasso' show will certainly demonstrate.

Moreover, by choosing artists who by their own definition create drawings as 'final products', Hoptman unintentionally reiterates market values. Walking through the exhibition, the dealers--Jeffrey Deitch, Andrea Rosen, Sadie Coles, Brent Sikkema, Gavin Brown--as much as the artists were certainly on display. Though no one can be faulted for highlighting works by artists who have been widely celebrated in other venues, it may be time--before we move past the 70s--to recall that the emphasis on process was a strategy of resistance against what today appears to be the inevitable commodification of art.

Barbara Pollack is an artist and writer living in New York.

.....  
**David Thorpe**  
*Life is Splendid 2000*  
.....



**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Herbert, Martin, David Thorpe Interim Art.  
Time Out, N° 1676, October 02-10 2002



## David Thorpe

Interim Art East End

**D**avid Thorpe's last exhibition of paper collages at Interim Art featured drab municipal architecture set in epic valleys that recalled Hudson River School painting. The blocky buildings have since vanished; the lush milieu remains. The settlers in this imagined land now span valleys using covered wooden suspension bridges whose struts are generously spangled with iridescent metal. They position rural knock-offs of California modernism on rocky precipices. And they have built an amazing church that, equal parts Gaudi and Gehry, sports grids of coloured glass, mosaic detailing and a wooden frontage that rises up like the bow of an ocean liner. Thorpe has turbo-charged his facture, too. These small intricately constructed images are produced from a shopping-list of ingre-

dients that includes modeller's wood, oxidised copper, tissue paper, coloured glass, fine mesh, and wild flowers that substitute for trees.

On the floor is an ornate structure of interlocking wooden circles with mosaic insets, which features a live garden of ferns and prairie flowers and could have escaped from one of his 2-D images. Thorpe clearly wants to make his fantasy world as real as possible--a world in which, as he writes in the handout, he tries 'to show people living without fear; full of happiness; being who they want to be--there must be no barriers.' Ironically, though, his works most strongly evoke the heavily circumscribed, Christian missionary spirit of the Pioneers. Is it a coincidence that three coloured-glass ornaments surrounding the flower garden resemble bullets, or is Thorpe more judicious than he appears? Martin Herbert

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

press release

DAVID THORPE  
New Kingdoms are Here

16 September - 20 October 2002  
please note: private view: SUNDAY 15 September, 6.00 - 8.00 pm

Maureen Paley Interim Art is pleased to present a second solo exhibition of new work by David Thorpe.

The world of the imagination is endless. We can make anything happen. All things are possible. We can make a world that is magnificent, full of adventure. We can participate and build a world of our dreams. I try through making my own pictures. I try to show these adventures, to make a world full of epic yet often modest moments.

I try to show a world as a wondrous place filled with spectacular lives and spectacular views. My work tries to help me see that all is possible, that we can transcend all limitations. My pictures are labours of love; I want to physically make this world come close to me. Through my imagination and so through my art all harm stops, all fear stops, excitement reigns. I try to show people living without fear; full of happiness; being who they want to be, doing what they want to do, going where they want to go. There must be no barriers. I want to make a world of endless pleasure.

David Thorpe

David Thorpe is to be included in the forthcoming exhibition Drawing Now: Eight Propositions, MoMA QNS, New York, from 16 October 2002 - 06 January 2003.

Recent exhibitions include Futureland 2001, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach; Extended Painting, Monica de Cardenas, Milan; Future Perfect: art on how architecture imagined the future; Comerhouse, Manchester and Twisted, Urban and Visionary Landscapes in Contemporary Painting, Van AbbeMuseum, Eindhoven. His work is collected widely both in Europe and abroad.

Gallery opening hours: Thursday to Sunday 11.00 - 6.00 and by appointment  
For further information please contact James Lavender on 020 7729 4112

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Sladen, Mark, David Thorpe @ Interim Art.  
KultureFlash, No 19, 2002



**ARTWORKER OF THE WEEK #1**

**David Thorpe @ Interim Art**

Mark Siaden (a curator at the Barbican) talks to artist David Thorpe about his recent work *Good People*.

*Good People* can be seen in David Thorpe's current exhibition at Interim Art in Bethnal Green. Thorpe (b 1972, London) is part of the wave of artists who emerged directly after the YBAs. He was noticed for his collages of intricately cut paper, which were featured in exhibitions such as *Die Young Stay Pretty* (ICA, 1998). Thorpe's current show includes a number of pictures featuring quirky Modernist buildings in wilderness settings. These works mark a stylistic departure for the artist, who has modified his collage technique to include not just paper but a host of other materials.

**Mark Siaden:** How did you go about making *Good People*?

**David Thorpe:** There is a vast variety of materials in there, as I was trying to get a sense of equivalents to the actual materials used in the architecture depicted, almost like a miniature building. The building in the picture is made out of very thick veneers - also oxidised copper, pebbles, Playdoh, a little bit of net curtain.

**MS:** What interests you about using materials that are like the things represented?

**DT:** I wanted to get more hard-core about building my own world. I've always been interested in creating my own world and it seems like common sense that if I'm constructing a tree I should do it in bark. You can also get different spatial levels, starting with tissue paper, using harder materials as you build it up; and usually the materials also get thicker so it's like this shallow relief. The technique also seems appropriate to the subject matter-these obsessive, hick communities, These pictures are images of things, but they could also potentially be manufactured within these worlds. They could be the types of images that would be seen inside these buildings. I'm always trying to find equivalences between the subject matter and the materials, and as in the last few years the subject matter has become more esoteric so the materials have become odder.

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Lafuente, Pablo, *A Room of their Own.*  
ArtReview, November 2002



Above: David Thorpe, *We Are Majestic in the Wilderness*, 1999

## A ROOM OF THEIR OWN

Twelve artists have been awarded a residency at Delfina Studios for 2002-2003. Six Brits--Kate Bright, Gareth Jones, Rachel Lowe, Goshka Macuga, David Thorpe and Mark Titchner--and six international artists--Haluk Akakce from Turkey, Yvonne Dröge Wendel from the Netherlands, Daria Martin from the US, Lenny Ratnasari from Indonesia, Saki Satom from Japan and Klaus Weber from Germany--will be given free studio spaces for two years, in the British artists' case, or just nine months--including accommodation--for the international artists.

The programme offers young artists, most of whom have been out of college for at least two years, the opportunity to work in one of 28 sought-after studios in the converted factory near London Bridge in Bermondsey, London. The studios are run by the Delfina Studio Trust, a registered charity established in 1988.

During the last 14 years, the Trust has played an important role in the development of the careers of artists who now count among the UK's best, including Glenn Brown, Adam Chodzko, Lucy Gunning, Gary Webb, Jane & Louise Wilson, Keith Tyson, Anya Gallaccio and Richard Woods. Thorpe, who recently had a solo show in East London's Maureen Paley Interim Art, and Lowe, a finalist in the 2002 Beck's Futures, are both strong contenders to follow in the footsteps of that group.

For further information on the Delfina Studio Trust, go to [www.delfina.org.uk](http://www.delfina.org.uk)

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

*JB, Take a look outside to reveal the hidden agenda.*  
*ArtReview, June 2002*



Net gains. **Above:** Hannah Starkey, *Butterfly Catchers*, 1999

## Take a look outside to reveal the hidden agenda

For so long relegated to provincial library foyers, the landscape as a subject has been making a subtle comeback. That this has been an almost undetected resurgence is to be expected; it's rare that we take a step back to admire the view, be it of the local shopping centre or a rolling vista of green and brown fields. Now this quiet subject is about to be given the kind of exposure normally reserved for more shocking topics. The Saatchi Gallery's current show, entitled simply "Landscape," is a bold and ambitious two-part exhibition which offers an opportunity to evaluate the both familiar and challenging world that surrounds us. Despite its tradi-

tional subject-matter, this is an exhibition rooted in the present. Humour, not immediately associated with landscapes, abounds. Dexter Dalwood's sinister but imagined painting of Gorbachev's Winter Retreat might appear superficial at first--a charge which could perhaps be levelled at the show in general. But on further inspection it's clear that Dalwood's use of bubble-gum colours belies the work's historical and political core. The impressions of timelessness associated with depictions of our natural environment are questioned in several of the works. The appropriation of other artists' styles--shown in Glenn Brown's Dali Christ or Mi-

chael Ashcroft's Tom Thompson, *The Drive*, 1916--references the past and simultaneously reveals difference. The interventions produce a narrative that is specific to a time and aware of that which went before it. Ashcroft's recreations of original landscapes, initially comforting, are tainted on the discovery that all signs of human presence have been removed. We have been obliterated, and we must acknowledge our position as mere passers-by, rather than participants in the scene. In contrast Hannah Starkey's images are disturbing, everyday reminders of the two-way relationship we may have with a landscape--as both the developers and products of our environment.

Part two of "Landscape"--a date has not yet been fixed--will include works by Noble and Webster, Sam Taylor-Wood and Michael Raedecker, with David Thorpe's collages acting as a graphic salute to the monumental scale and beauty of an inner-city landscape. Devoid of the gritty, urban realism of Starkey's *Butterfly Catchers*, Thorpe's images act as darkly beautiful reminders; describing a familiar space and exposing a world we do not inhabit, a night-time utopia we cannot enter.

This is a show stamped with the Saatchi signature, so it's unsurprising to learn that the exhibition was separated into two parts simply because there wasn't enough space. The scale and range of the works promise to make "Landscape" a stunning view--but whether it makes a lasting impression remains to be seen.

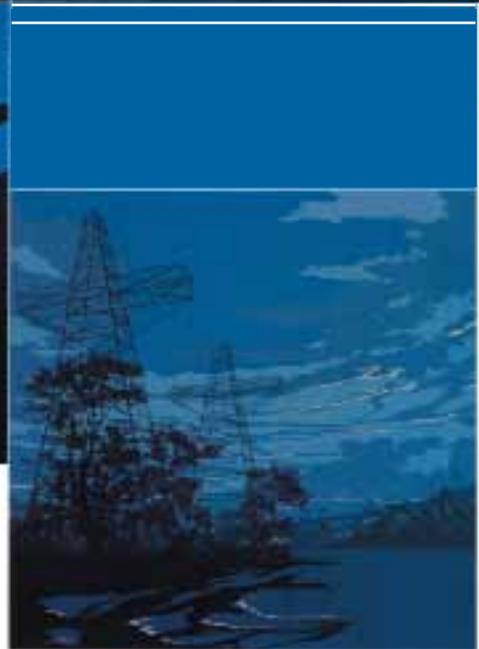
JB

"Landscape", to 30 June, Saatchi Gallery,  
London N1 (020 7336 7365)

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Chung,  
Karen,  
Cut-and-  
Paste  
Poet.  
wallpaper,  
March  
2001



**CUT-AND-PASTE POET**

David Thorpe creates strange otherworlds from meticulous collage and an eye for pastiche. We take a look at his unsettling urban landscapes

USING collage to construct a mysterious, self-contained alter-world, David Thorpe's soaring pastiche pictures setup questions regarding the existence of a parallel universe. Referencing a kind of modern wilderness and injecting ugly urban landscapes with a heady sense of romance and mystery, his pictures reference the American pioneer landscape painter Albert Bierstadt, architects Bruce Goff and John Lautner and pay homage to the legacy of British Brutalism. Whilst his earlier work was preoccupied with the city, his more recent work moves out into the wilderness and asks questions such as: What if modernism as a solution for social ills had worked? It may not have provided the definitive answer to a host of contemporary ills, but in the ambiguous twilight of Thorpe's world, what matters is the here and now of the moment, underneath the dear constellations of dreamy skyscapes, representations of a perfect, unattainable world.

Thorpe uses a refreshingly lo-fi technique, intricately cutting and pasting shards and fragments of paper to make painterly collage, sometimes sitting half a centimetre thick on the surface of the canvas, worked within the confines of his unassuming south-east London flat. He decks his surroundings with a pervasive mist of Spray Mount which seeps through and settles on everything in his workspace. In Thorpe's world, figures gesture into the middle distance or point excitedly outside the visual frame to objects unseen. They are contented, modern adventurers, under-scaled and innocent, absorbed in the present. Perfectly placed against the scale of their surroundings, the figures are isolated and scaled down so drastically

against the vastness of the mountains or the skyscraper (spotting them is a little like playing 'Where's Wally?') as to appear almost inconsequential.

THORPE'S landscapes represent an ideal that can be read as a pretty picture or charged with ominous possibilities, simultaneously familiar and unsettling, peaceful yet charged with a sense of unfulfilled energy. Thorpe's works take an age to complete, intricate and supremely detailed; they are painterly, informed and anything but self-referential. Objects such as cars and planes are merely accessories in the landscape, like a child's drawing of a house. The homes and machines of Thorpe's world are invariably generic representations, which root them in a time period that could fall anywhere within the last century. Somehow there is a sense that these scenes are almost too perfect. The immaculate cloud formations of straight lines and wispy blue flatness are a good example, they impart an unsettling feeling that we could be seconds away from witnessing some large-scale, modern atrocity that never arrives. Karen Chung

## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Beatrice, Luca, Extended Painting, Monica De Cardenas.  
*Flash Art*, Vol.XXXIV N° 219 July-September 2001

### GROUP



PETER DOIG, *Island Painting*, 2001.

Since the late twentieth century, painting has continuously strived to redefine itself through contact with other art forms. It's especially within the Anglo-Saxon world that painting has concerned itself with a linguistic experimentation that goes beyond easel painting, and that introduces less orthodox forms. The British scene, inheriting the suc-

cess of the cold conceptual movements and of Bad Painting, continues to produce the most interesting voices. David Thorpe's research, of which only a small work on paper is exhibited, is paradigmatic but of exceptional quality: a solitary way of painting without a paintbrush, tearing and overlapping fragments in a process similar to collage. If Thorpe is the principal exponent of a "Brico-Painting" trend that assimilates origami, then the very young Gillian Carnegie is inspired by classical models (the nude, dead nature, the idyllic landscape), informing them with a vibrant sensuality of warm and meditative chromes. It's difficult these days to portray a pot

of flowers or a nude without falling into rhetoric and repetition, but Carnegie's paintings demonstrate freshness and innovation. Peter Doig, who belongs to another generation becomes the reference point for this tendency: the room dedicated to him is based upon an amicable character, a sort of neo-hippie that looks a bit like Johnny Cash, and who, dressed in black, moves like a phantom through nature and cities, mountain, and bars at night. The Scandinavian scene is different: Glenn Sorensen paints flowers and portraits in pale colors that exude an anaemic psychedelia influenced by 1970s revival films like *Fucking Amal* and *Together*. The American lan-

### EXTENDED PAINTING

MONICA DE CARDENAS, MILAN

guage seem to be more stereotypical, with Blake Rayne's abstract-surreal visions and Verne Dawson's research into authentic roots. In any case, the painting of the Millennium is based upon a determined speculative tension, and places reason rather than emotion at the centre of its operation. This explains the inclusion of a photograph by Hannah Starkey in the exhibition: at first it may seem a little forced, but in reality, it's a consequence of the linguistic exchange between painting and other ways of seeing. (Luca Beatrice) (Translated from Italian by Graeme Shore)

## CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Herbert, Martin, David Thorpe at Interim Art, London.  
[london.co.uk/magazine](http://london.co.uk/magazine), January 2000

## David Thorpe

at Interim Art, London

2 December 1999 - 23 January 2000

Hey, who turned the lights on? David Thorpe's meticulous, cutout paper collages of urban environments have previously all been set in the wee small hours. No longer; in this new suite of works, the clock has ticked forward to the early morning, when peachy light suffuses the surfaces. And that's not the only difference; the mise-en-scene has shifted too. Whereas the other works spoke of inner-city boredom, a longing to escape, and would routinely feature daredevil kids racing along narrow rooftops like shards of hope puncturing the gloom, here we are out in a countryside of sorts. There are mountains, spruce pines, valleys, cliff-faces; yet interspersed with all this are the same utilitarian housing units that peppered Thorpe's earlier work. A little funkier this time, they tend to be octagonal and designed with danger in mind; three hang off the edge of a cliff-face, waiting to be toppled by erosion.

This is work with narrative that spreads like brushfire. One places all this sudden nature in relation to Thorpe's previously authority defined work, and pictures a huge national park with barbed-wire perimeter fences (surveillance helicopters circle in one of the works). One thinks of the rigorously patrolled edges of Truman Burbank's world in *The Truman Show*. If this is paradise, why are the kids still cycling unhappily along the roofs of buildings? Why are there three caravans pitched on the edge of a cliff? To return to filmic analogies, perhaps this is close to the central thesis of David Fincher's *Fight Club*; that modern individuals are so jaded and numbed by late-capitalist life that they deliberately inject danger and pain into their lives just to feel something. There also seems to be a pioneer spirit here, a sense that one can make it alone out in the wilderness.

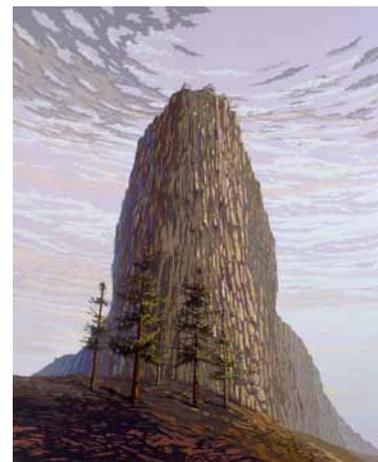
Or perhaps not. The pleasure of Thorpe's work is that such speculations are necessarily mirages. The way that these works are made emphasises their construction: fictions, the artist's own world. Thorpe obviously spends hours cutting out fiddly little bits of paper and sticking them over each other to achieve his effects. The images are built up in layers, the penumbra of layers beneath showing as shadow effects and sensation of depth. Close up, they look like the collages they are. Step back a foot and they look like illustrative paintings. Thorpe seems to be carefully ensuring that this world doesn't look too real: his colours tend towards twee and he exaggerates perspective and scale. The skies are curving, mackerel-flecked and huge. One is always below the object in the artwork: at the bottom of a mountain or cliff, throwing the burden of activity upon the viewer. But Thorpe's saturated colours, his salmon pinks and pale sky blues, the unreal shades of early morning, sometimes give his work the look of old Led Zeppelin album covers: hippy-mystic. One never quite knows where one stands with these images, although one can admire his skill at colour combination, given that he uses precoloured paper.

Certainly, it's an interesting shift for Thorpe, but this work is most efficacious when contrasted with previous images. The delight is in the detail; the way that a cliff-face can be made to look like a gnarled tree by inserting cracks into the surface to show layers underneath, by the way that the artist lovingly applies cut-out graffiti to the side of a speeding train. It's at these moments that one pictures the artist as a bedroom boffin, his face lighting up with sly delight at his own cleverness.

[londonart.co.uk](http://londonart.co.uk)  
magazine



Quiet Life  
1999



We are Majestic in the Wilderness  
1999  
image courtesy of Maureen Paley/  
Interim Art

## CASEY KAPLAN

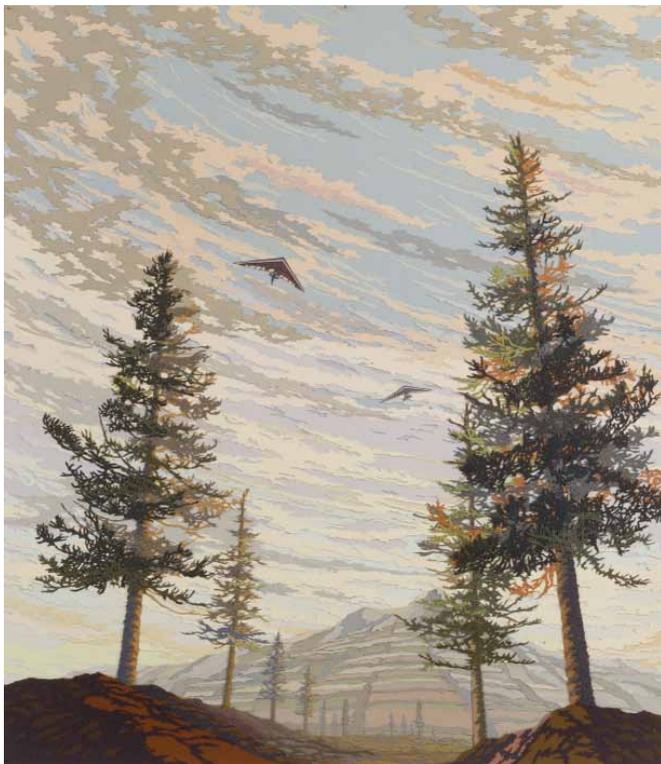
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Gellatly, Andrew, *David Thorpe, Interim Art*.  
*frieze*, Issue 52 May 2000

### David Thorpe

Interim Art London

Robert Kennedy's famous remark about Frank Stella's painting 'at least we know he has a ruler...' could be re-worked here—at least we know David Thorpe has a modelling knife. He has been cutting paper into skeins of clouds and architectural forms



for about three years now, and they have become larger, more technically superb every year. Pencilled in target marks and guides locate the clouds and tree branches, but once you get close, the shingled surface becomes something else scaly and weirdly reptilian.

This exhibition of five works (all from 1999) continues the development of his interest in Brutalist architecture, but no longer with the same unending Corbus-

ier-inspired vistas that influenced works such as *Forever* (1998). In these new pictures, concrete cubes and polygons have been made discrete and misplaced, like Monty Python council flats or caravans that have been uprooted, catapulted across oceans and allowed to roam in the American West. They seem a little out of place, even perplexed in their new neighbourhoods. In *Pilgrims* three towerblocks

lean out from a cliff-top, isolated like John Lautner's trussed and tensioned Malin residence on Mulholland Drive, but below the massive buttresses there is no San Fernando Valley and no Julius Shulman vista, just scratchy pines, cedars and shale. The fluorescent-lit space at Interim accentuated the slightly swampy, verdigrised feel of one work in particular: *Quiet Life* is unusual in the way it somehow flattens

out the milky, sparsely populated, westwardness of everything. With *Out from the Night*, *The Day is Beautiful* and *we are Filled with Joy* the slightly retro, delta-winged hang-gliders have a Bond movie threat about them, as if a group of sinister Austrian leather-boys might be up there,

In Thorpe's new pictures, concrete cubes and polygons have been made discrete and misplaced, like Monty Python council flats or caravans that have been uprooted, catapulted across oceans and allowed to roam in the American west.

riding the thermals, priming some kind of air-to-air missile.

In *We are Majestic* in the Wilderness, Thorpe's absorption in Americana is complete: this view of square houses squatting under an overwhelming rock-face is evidently influenced by Albert Bierstadt's Luminism, the Hudson River School and the paintings of Thomas Moran, such as *The Cliff Dwellers* (1899). Obviously, Western light isn't nearly the same as the watery East Coast version-- the maritime light of New York State is replaced by the flatter, more vaulted sky of the Rocky Mountain States. But Thorpe's approximation of the vitrescent surfaces of the Luminist pictures is an extraordinary thing, like coming nose-up to the nylon scrim of a Robert Irwin installation, but where light is objectified as paper trimmings, experientially real.

Nobody could be surprised that Thorpe was inspired by the definitive song of reel dancing and horse opera, Aaron Copland's *Rodeo* *Hoe Down* (1942). It might not have turned out so well, though, as in Robert Redford's heartlandish, floodlit baseball epic, *The Natural* (1984), which featured a Copland inspired Randy Newman score,

or the epochal, moderately stomachturning 'Beef, it's what's for dinner' commercial on American TV Thorpe's sentimentality is under control.

Much more important as a reference point is Spike Lee's movie *He Got Game* (1998), which juxtaposes inner city bas-

ketball games, slomos, dunks and spins with the same balletic Copland soundtrack. In his work Thorpe explores concrete BMX parks and sodium lit playgrounds. The connection to Copland's idealisation of the rodeo rider is striking. In *Rodeo King* a lone BMX rider pops a wheelie along the skyline's rooftop ridge. Thorpe loves the possibility of human transcendence amongst Brutalist architecture as much as Lee loves the sublime drama of urban basketball courts. Underlying Luminist painting was a cultural myth that identified the American land as the new Eden, without the ruins of decayed and corrupt civilisations, one that defied Aristotle's warning that people would always want to live in cities. Thorpe has taken his skate-park heroes, cable car riders and hang-gliders and given them a little more room to play under the start-from-scratch American sky.

Andrew Gellatly

**CASEY KAPLAN**  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Williams, Gilda. Profile: Paper Moon,  
*Art Monthly*, Nº 233 February 2000

## Profile

### ■ Paper Moon

#### Gilda Williams on David Thorpe

Once the revolution is completed, what kind of homes shall we live in? Where, for example, would a 21st-century Jean-Jacques Rousseau set up house? Probably a trailer park in the American West, in an all-mod-cons caravan perched high in the peaks of an Albert Bierstadt painting, fulfilling the new social contract in a rent-free vacation home. Rousseau would live in a David Thorpe collage, nestled inside a paper landscape called *We Are Majestic in the Wilderness*, 1999.

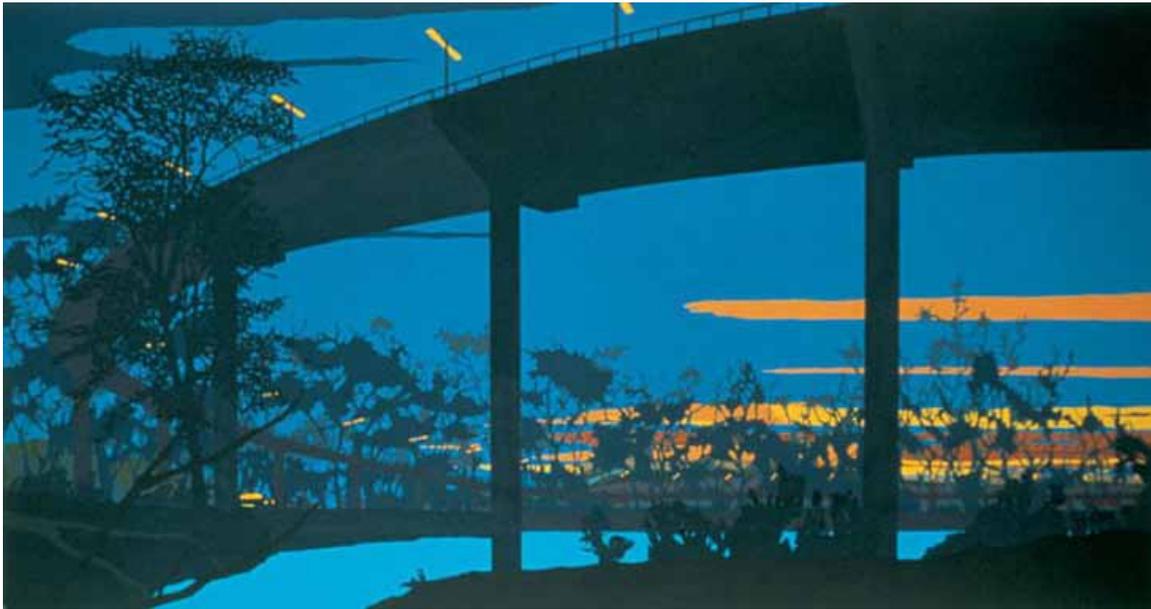
Thorpe's soaring views of nature and post-Blade Runner cityscapes make you ask, what if the utopias of the Enlightenment and of Modernism had worked? What if the happy, revolutionary schemes devised by early 20th-century architects had borne fruit? One is reminded of Le Corbusier's drawings of his visionary *Ville Radieuse*, weirdly seductive even today. Clean, crimeless high-rises fade into an endless urban one-point perspective, the earth below carpeted with lush vegetation and empty tennis courts, the air filled with noiseless aeroplanes and huge, healthy white clouds. Ultimately, Le Corbusier was a Romantic like Rousseau, dreaming of real freedom and democracy in uniform residential units towering above a Bois du Boulogne-like jungle that would replace the old, unhealthy city streets. As Le Corbusier envisioned it, the architecture itself would solve most social ills. Domestic upkeep would be minimal in his airy interiors, and leisure time would abound in dustless, temperature-controlled villas in the sky. Who are the serene, poised, desireless men and women lounging about in Le Corbusier's drawings if not early 20th-century versions of the Rousseauian noble savage, enlightened and emancipated beings free of want, timelessly living the simple, good life?!

David Thorpe is a kind of Romantic too, with his paper cut-outs of vast gleaming cities and parklands inhabited by tiny, contented figures, in the big world/small people tradition of Caspar David Friedrich and Frederick Church. But Thorpe's figures are hardly transcendental, 18th-century explorers overwhelmed by the awesome spectacle of nature. These are more like Le Corbusier's contemporary noble savages, well-fed city dwellers, merrily gathering on an empty bridge to wave at a helicopter (*Live for Kicks*, 1997), or riding an eco-friendly cable car to gaze at a perfect moon (*Midnight Rendezvous*, 1997). These are the uncomplicated people whom Rousseau theorised would have lived before the Fall; Thorpe's figures indeed have never fallen, having paraglided elegantly to earth in monogamous teams of two (*Out from the Night, the Day Is Beautiful and We Are Fitted with Joy*, 1999). Once safely landed, small groups of these underscaled, ageless innocents join together at such events as a summer roof party (*Watching Rockets*, 1997). They are uncomplaining, modern revellers, absorbed in the here and now of the moment, admiring together the constellations and comets in the clear heavens above. One can almost hear the quiet strains of Beck or the Beach Boys' *Endless Summer* piped into the automatic, indoor/outdoor sound system concealed beneath the patio tiles; the refrigerator purring and dispensing nutritious, nonaddictive ambrosia—but no more than is actually consumed. This is a world without waste, without clutter, without sound save for the occasional flutter of a handglider in the big cold sky, or the windless spinning of a monumental ferris wheel (*Fun*, 1997) - effortlessly erected, no doubt, to commemorate the lasting achievements of the revolution.

Such is the dream-like atmosphere of David Thorpe's collages, with their ability to conjure scenarios



David Thorpe  
*Forever* 1998



and fictions of a much-evolved parallel universe. Perhaps the most corny Romantic scene of all, however, is that depicted by the artist at work. Surrounded by scraps of overpriced art paper in a cramped bedroom in London's bleakly urban New Cross, the artist draws with a razor the lacy silhouettes of mighty trees, or the elaborate contours of spiralling mountain clouds, or paper slivers of a Concorde jet path. In his head is an idiosyncratic, surprisingly coherent image-mix that combines photos from 1950s editions of *Progressive Architecture*; filmstills from *North by Northwest* or James Bond flicks; the American frontier paintings of Bierstadt or Church; banal architectural renderings for sprawling leisure parks and community shopping centres and finally, the sweeping, anonymous urban vistas occasionally spotted in US television shows like *Quincy* or *Hart to Hart*. Although they are essentially two-dimensional and within the landscape genre, these collages are not really connected to painting, and Thorpe doesn't think like a painter. Somehow the works share something with Donald Judd, with their peculiar colour palette, the no hand-finish, the vague social utopianism though with none of Judd's anti-figurative theorising and refusal of Pop. Thorpe also shares a minimalist love for seriality, for instance in a sequence of repeated square windows paced across a modernist facade in *Party Night*, 1997. One especially beautiful detail in *Live for Kicks* is a line of identical orange street lights, long and thin, stitched across the picture like the relentless road markings in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. The artist seems to relish the paper's ability to repeat its forms exactly, as if cut by machine, as if superhuman.

Thorpe's works before 1999 never adopted painting's traditional single, principal light source but preferred a flat, all-over light, resulting in an indefinable moment of the day. Is it twilight? Midnight? Midday? There will be no clocks after the revolution, just endless time. And endless space: immense, lean concourses of skyscrapers; giant octagonal constructions cantilevered over cliffs; great ribbons of never-ending bridges. Rockets will lift against gravity and a kind of weightless-

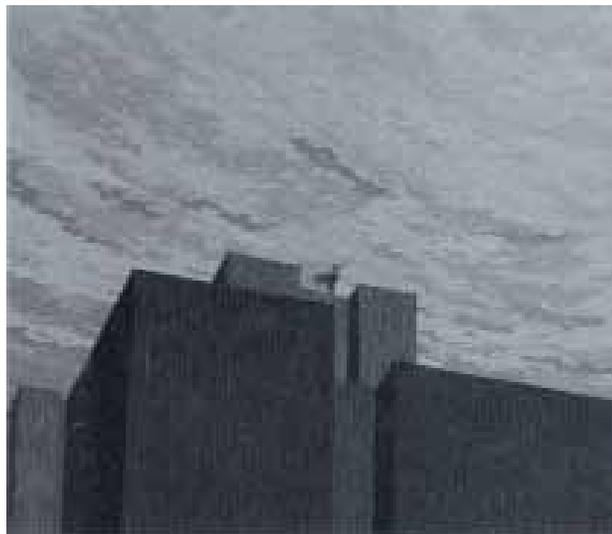
ness, as light as the paper itself, will reign once the dust has settled. Crowned as our new post-revolutionary leader will surely be the *Rodeo King*, 1999, a 12 year-old former skateboarding champion immortalised in his official court portrait by David Thorpe. Our leader is seen from afar, unrecognisable, performing bicycle wheelies on an empty rooftop like Napoleon mounted on his rearing horse, charged and triumphant. Finally, someone in whom we can all really believe.

.....  
**David Thorpe**  
*We Never Sleep* 1998  
 .....

1. See Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, MIT Press, 1984, and more recently, Adolf Max Vogt et al, *Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage: Toward an Archaeology of Modernism*, MIT Press, 1998.

Gilda Williams is a writer and commissioning editor at Phaidon Press.

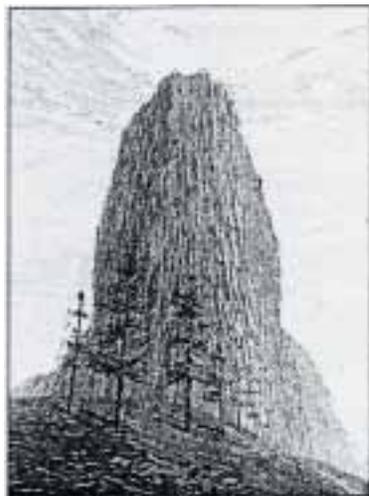
.....  
**David Thorpe**  
*Rodeo King* 1999  
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**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

McLaren, Duncan, David Thorpe.  
*The Independent on Sunday*, 12 December 1999



David Thorpe, 'We are Majestic in the Wilderness' INTERIM ART

**David Thorpe**

Interim Art, London

The five pictures in this show of work by David Thorpe are made entirely of layers of coloured paper, cut out with a scalpel and stuck together by a fine spray of glue. If you stare closely at them, you discover that the layerings is done in quite a sophisticated way, but you also notice odd pencil marks, dust, nicks in the paper, and an absence of any interest within each hard-edged area of flat colour. So you step back and enjoy the spectacular images as they were meant to be seen.

Previous work by Thorpe featured modernist high-rise buildings at sunset, and made urban living look cool and romantic. The present show is dominated by idealised rural scenes in the full light of day.

Mountains rather than tower blocks, then. The skies may be lighter, with no sudden tonal or colour contrasts, but they're still dominated by long feathery clouds that must suit the artist's paper-cutting technique. Indeed all the elements of the composition--mountains, concrete blocks, fir trees-- are made of long strips, which helps account for the pictures' elegance.

The signs of human presence are high up in most of the pictures. In *Out from the Night*, the *Day is Beautiful* and *we are Filled with Joy* (a title which can be read as a pretty fair summary of Thorpe's latest professional move) it is in the form of hanggliders. In *Pilgrims*--where three-story buttressed concrete blocks jut out from a mountainside--there are cable-cars and helicopters. And in the tallest and most magnificent picture in the show, caravans rest on top of a regular tower-block of a mountain. With this image in particular, Thorpe seems to have taken his vision of contemporary urban architecture a stage further on. An individual high-rise resident may have relatively modest-sized accommodation, but the wonderful view is all his or hers, and so, effectively, is the great mass of the building. Such an elemental view of high-rise life wouldn't be teneable from the socially disastrous first decades of modernism, but it must strike a chord with today's prosperous residents of the Barbican towers, for example. And surely every worker at Canary Wharf can see the contemporaneity--the exhilarating relevance and romance--of this image.

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Windsor, John, The Independent Collector.  
The Independent, 12 January 1999

## THE INDEPENDENT COLLECTOR

John Windsor's Guide to Collecting Contemporary Art. This Week: David Thorpe

AT LEAST one critic made the error of describing David Thorpe's pictures as "paintings" when they were shown in Martin Maloney's *Die Young Stay Pretty* exhibition at the ICA in central London.

Closer inspection reveals that they are collages of coloured art paper whose contours are half a centimetre deep in places. He cuts out shapes with a scalpel--it took him a day to cut out each tree in his big 5ft by 5ft 6in *After the Rain*, shown right - then puts them under the mattress on the floor where he sleeps. After several nights they are well and truly stuck.

Paintings they are not, but they are certainly about painting. Their hard-edged segments of flat colour seem to mimic the cool new realism in painting that has caught Charles Saatchi's eye, and to carry it a stage further. Thorpe's greatest influence is on the featureless and beguiling paintings of fashionable women by the American Alex Katz, one of Saatchi's favourites.

Two years ago a rudimentary two-tone Thorpe collage cost £500. Now his prices range from £1,000 to £3,000. Some of those early collages, of nocturnal urban architecture, will be shown in the Saatchi Gallery's *Neurotic Realism* later this year --and he is negotiating a commission with Saatchi for a 8ft by 10ft collage. His gallerist, Maureen Paley, of Interim Art, will be taking *After the Rain* to next month's international Armory Show of new art in New York.

The ICA show was the first of Maloney's to include Thorpe's work. Maloney was his tutor in art theory on his MA fine arts course at Goldsmith's College.

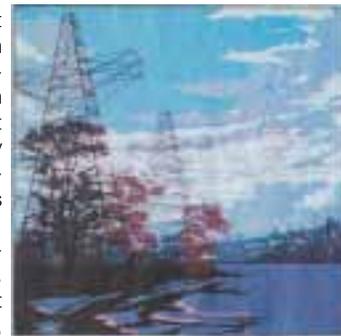
Thorpe, 26, began making rural scenes when he realised he was making landscape. He started looking at the silhouettes in the highly polished landscapes of Claude, Friedrich and Fragonard. There is a back-to-basics feel about his work.

If Claude were alive today, would he have dwarfed his flat, seemingly cut-out trees with electricity pylons instead of

classical temples? He would certainly not have lost the romantic blend of sylvan simplicity and monumentalism that Thorpe's work echoes. Art paper and sprayon photo-montage glue would probably not have appealed to Claude's 17th-century French taste. In Thorpe's work, the collage technique--a craft skill--underlines the humility of his vision.

There are few people in Thorpe's collages (and no nymphs or shepherds). But there is a sense of narrative - a bit like Raymond Carver's novels, he says, in which nothing much happens but you sense that a lot is going on. Thorpe's three-room flat in south London is a bit like that. The fine spray of glue settles everywhere, trapping dust and small objects in a glutinous immobility. Several flatmates have quit rather than get trapped in it.

Interim Art: 0171-254 9607



**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
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FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

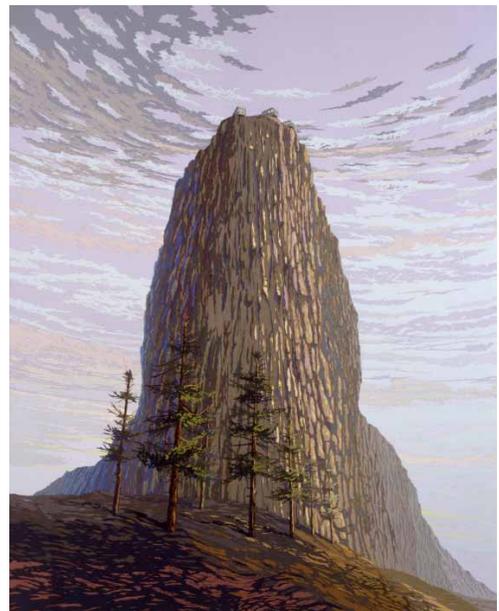
Grant, Simon, *Housing estate art*.  
The Guardian Guide, 11-17 December 1999

# Housing estate art

There are a growing number of younger artists who have moved away (thankfully) from smart-arse playfulness to a more exploratory, inventive and essentially optimistic style. Along with Michael Raedecker and Paul Morrison, David

Thorpe graduated from Goldsmiths' only last year, and uses landscape as a backdrop for examining

the gap between past and present. Influenced by the Hudson River school painters as well as GLC buildings and housing estates, his paper collages question whether idealistic imagery has any mileage. SG Interim Art, LondonE2, until January 23



**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

press release

DAVID THORPE

We are Majestic in the Wilderness

02 December 1999 - 23 January 2000

(gallery closed: 20 December 1999 -10 January 2000)

please note - private view: Saturday 27 November 1999, 6.00 - 8.00 pm

Maureen Paley Interim Art is pleased to present David Thorpe's first solo exhibition.

David Thorpe uses paper collage to construct and 'physically make' his own world. Having graduated from Goldsmiths' MA in 1998, he has been included in a number of group shows in London and abroad.

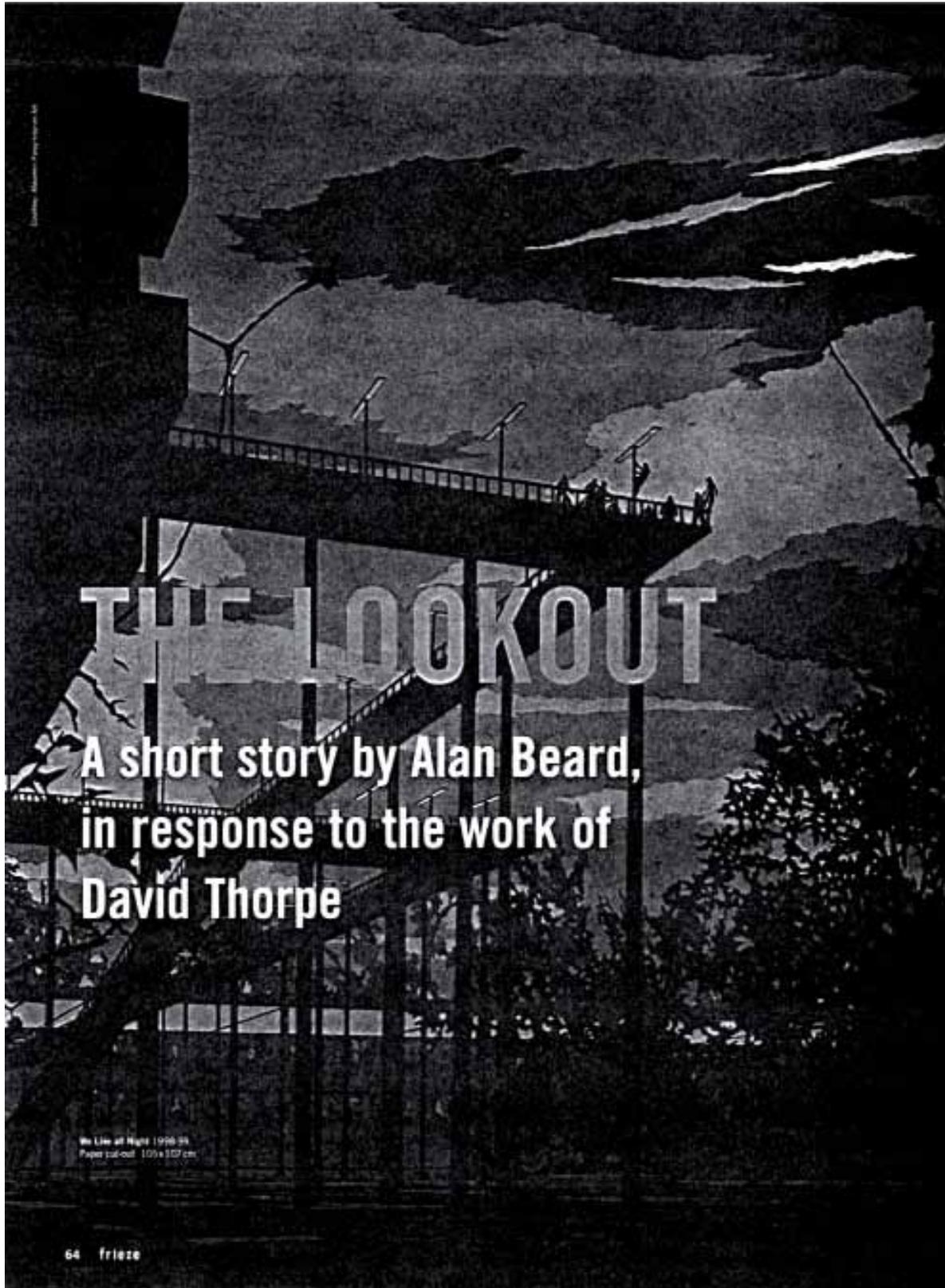
The new work is beginning to move out from the urban city, that has preoccupied the earlier work, towards the wilderness, "home of the independent maverick spirit and of epic adventures." Thorpe has looked at Albert Bierstadt and some of the Hudson River school painters, the architects Bruce Goff and John Lautner as well as the architecture of GLC buildings and housing estates which he refers to as "English brutalism" for inspiration. This work has been made as a time consuming and painstakingly hand crafted labour of love often to the soundtrack of Copland's Hoe-Dawn.

He is concerned with depiction of epic moments mixed with the mundane. Some of the pictures are of precariously placed buildings and caravans craning for a better view of their world. There is a narrative at work that is as enigmatic as that which motivated the Blair Witch Project. However, rather than focus on the dark side of life the newer work is more optimistic and lighter in spirit.

For further information please contact James Lavender on 020 7729 4112.

**CASEY KAPLAN**  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Beard, Alan, The Lookout,  
Frieze, July - August 1999, p64-69.





Once I would have said we were the most visited part of the city, here at its remotest edge. Helicopters coming out of the sky, ambulances to pick up the dead and bleeding, police to take down the details. The Time of Nick. Politicians arrived in black cars and walked the charred area, craning their necks to look up at the three towers perched on land that juts out into the city's reservoir. The TV crew that came to make a documentary about the crime wave had their cameras nicked. Social workers honked as they passed each other on their way in and out of the estate, particularly after 'Fanny' Adams let her daughter eat herself to death in one of the flats above us. She fattened with all the trouble around and ended up so big it seemed dangerous to get in the lift with her. No that she came out much. Nor did anyone else if they could help it. Mugging, suicide, arson, burglary. There was an accident where a lorry came off the flyover followed by a car. Nothing to do with us, of course, but on our patch. We hardly watched them clear the debris, except for the younger kids, we were too involved in our own clear-ups.

Things are calmer now. You can't leave your door unlocked like my gran says you could in the old days, but it's nothing like it was. Now I can hang out outside (not that I do much) and watch kids rollerblade along the paths that loop down through the slopes of grass between the towers. In our block we now have regular floor parties, with all the doors open and music set up in the corridor. When the lift at the end opens by accident, the people see us and often return later. Rachel comes, the thin, dark haired daughter of Annie, a friend of mum's. I call her my XYZ girl because of the shapes her elbows and knees make out of her limbs. She's rarely still, moving around constantly, tapping ash from her cigarette. You could say she's posing, but you can see she's trying things out--different clothes, or make up or hairstyles every time. She seems made for the towers, nimble--I've seen her on the stairs, up them like she's on fast forward--darting, but able to fade into the background, essential here.

Like me, I'm nearly 16, little, bowed. Eyes stuck to the floor. But I see everything, everyone. From the man who lives amongst the wheeliebins in the basement and helps the dustmen and cadges fags off them, to the couple that live on the roof, 19 floors up, take drugs and tie themselves with long ropes to the air conditioning vent in case they're tempted to fly.

I patrol. I am neighbourhood watch. Darren gave me the job. He's mum's curent boyfriend and supplies the area; not the heavy stuff, just blow, some whizz. People come and go all day, everyone calm and chatty--greeting me, my sister Melanie, seven, and Dave, the youngest, a crawler, and Darren's own--on their way to the kitchen at the back where Darren works with his heated knife and accurate scales. On nice days they sit out on the balcony and blow the white smoke into acres of blue sky they see from 13 stories up (floor 12A).

Darren's never lived in a flat before and seems to like it. he points out the finer points that no one else has--the use of natural wood in a lot of the fittings, how solid and well designed the place was inside and outside,

how it looked as he was driving back from one of his runs, lit up against the background of water. Most of all, like me, he appreciates the view. Mum says I spent my toddlerhood staring out at the sky, its huge rolling clouds or its far, far distances on clear days. Mum says my first words were 'fog' and 'sun'. It was only when I got older, taller, I was able to look down and see the city spread below, as far as you could see, distant blocks taller than us marking the centre. I watched for signs of life: a train sliding diagonally across a corner, boats moving along the canal glimpsed through the tops of trees; closer, the flyover that looks as if it's taking off and reaching out to us but then curves away, held aloft by concrete stanchions. Darren's grateful to me for point out the landmarks--the GPO tower, a golden domed mosque, the parks that are gashes of green. 'People'd pay to see this', is his verdict. Evenings are best--the sunsets (Darren and I grade them) which make the city outline look like a backdrop for a movie. When it's snowing he calls me out to look with him up into air full of smudges like ash, further up like millions of full stops.

All this is undoubtedly due to the draw he puts down his neck. I don't know what he'd be like without it. Darren smokes like smoke is air, like it is breath and oxygen, life he's tucking down there in his lung--but he's always careful to keep it away from the kids especially his baby (I'm allowed to join in occasionally). Mum likes this consideration, and how much of a contrast he is to her previous boyfriends, including Melanie's dad who may or not be Nick, and mine who's 'left the area' (mum). Darren takes an interest, giving me the job of lookout and childminder and Melanie is encouraged to do her plays, set in fairy glens with wounded horses, in front of him and he says she is going to be a great actress.

He calls me 'kid' and lies on the sofa with his hair tied back in a ginger pony tail and 'not bad muscles' (mum) sticking out of his T-shirt. He asks me about my homework, 'Conrad?' He wrote *Heart of Darkness* which *Apocalypse Now* is based on'. He retrieves the old video in its tattered case next time he's in Blockbusters and watches it with me. He loves the beginning and keeps rewinding to repeat the lines: 'Saigon, I'm still in Saigon'. When mum does have one of her mornings, less frequent now, Darren's usually there putting on the kettle, seeing to David, warming his bottle, always remarking on the broad sky at the window, having the door open on nice days although we get no sun in the mornings and all below stands in the shadow we cast, sometimes falling all the way to the curve of the flyover, its top edge across the shirts of hidden drivers on their way to work.

Mum's friends come and visit again, staying for a spliff and a chat. Doing each other's roots--there's always someone in the corner of the room with tinfoil on her head. Chatting about old boyfriends--'there was far in a cullander. Remember him?'. 'That bloke with hair like an orchestra conductor?'. 'Oh aye and how many orchestra conductors do you know?'. Most feel Darren's good for mum, but there are one or two dissenters.



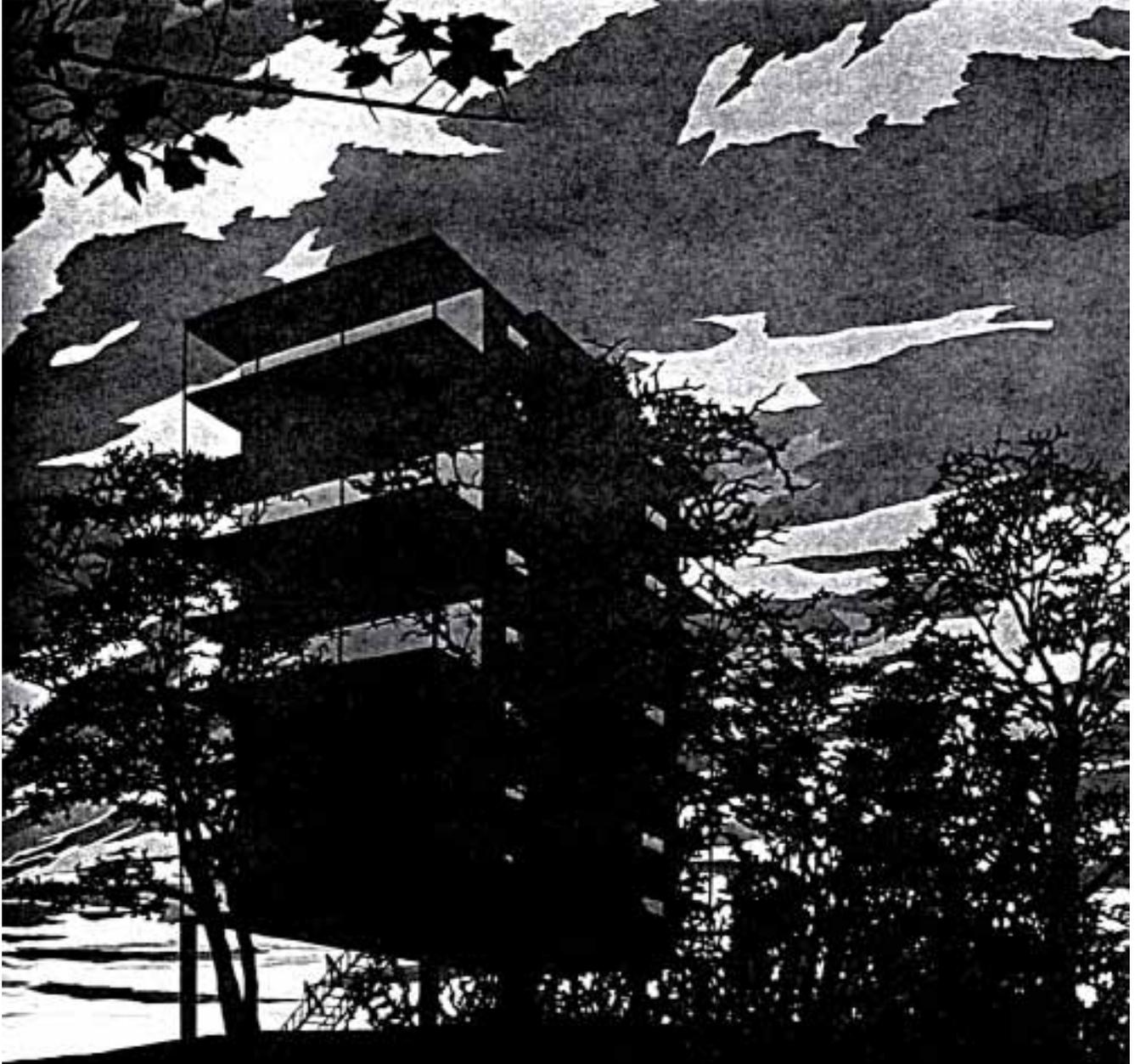
Annie says he's too soft. 'Soft as shit. Thinks your arse is a perfume factory and we all know who's been there'. 'So does he', says mum, 'I don't hide nothing'.

Dave, if he's asleep, is in the pram--one bought specially to fit the lift--Melanie's in her room playing with her dolls or with one of the kids brought along, while I hang about. They've got used to my presence and sometimes talk about me as if I'm not there. 'Such a shame about his acne, will it leave scars?'. 'Bound to'. If Rachel's there with her mum, which she sometimes is, I get very embarrassed. 'Still', they always add, 'he's so clever. Always reading, writing'. 'He never bunks off school'. Then they get on to the usual subjects.

One old boyfriend always crops up: Nick. Darren, who

sometimes joins the group after he's shut up shop, likes to hear stories about him. 'Was he good in bed then this Nick?' The women differ on this, those who knew him early--'yes', 'strong stuff' to those who knew him later--'crap', 'wasn't interested'.

Mum knew him early on, she was into Arnie in his Terminator days and what with Nick's bodybuilding and being 'quite handsome if a little gormless around the mouth', she fell for him. He was a new boy on the block and mum was always quick with the new boys. He wasn't around long enough for anything really bad to happen but I didn't like him being in the flat. I tried to tell mum but she was impatient with my seven year old attempt--



'You mustn't think someone's guilty because of a look in their eye'. He was obsessed with the weights he kept in their bedroom--I wasn't allowed to touch them or even look at them. I'd catch a glimpse of him sat on the bed in his athletic vest lifting dumbbells that looked like toys in his hands. He began to growl at me when mum was out. Luckily he left for a woman down the corridor and from then on he worked his way around the block, zigzagging up and down the floors from one side to the other.

And then it began. He got kicked out by one woman too many and couldn't find anyone to take him in, not even Annie, and began living in doorways and cupboards and spaces in the building which would have been tolerated except he began to threaten people, write his name everywhere and throw things off balconies. He put a sweatband

round his head and proclaimed himself king of the block. He threw rival males down the stairs and ran down to kick them down another flight. No matter numbers. He was a gang unto himself, as police found out trying to hold him down and getting bitten and kicked. Marjory, fantastically freckled and shrunken from having too many kids or something says, 'I'd chucked him out and he was still coming round for his marital rights though he never focking married me. Once he's outside banging and shouting and Lynne lets him in and I tell Marcus to ring the police on his mobile. "They won't focking come" he say and I'm off to the back bedroom and get in the built-in and he's coming down the corridor with two or three kids on each arm, slowing him down, but he carries on like a focking giant the noise

he's making. I'm hid and it's like that scene out of Halloween with him pounding on the cupboard door and panels getting knocked in'. She's glad he's dead. Not so Annie: 'He was bad but he had a heart underneath. Inside. He came to my door once early morning, drunk, froze, but he was polite. He had this thing that he'd made for Rachel, been up all night doing it. Tied elastic to a stick and made an elephant out of plastic and fabric and when you pulled the elastic the trunk moved. I want to give this to Rachel he said, he insisted and I had to get her up'. She looks at Rachel to confirm this story but she looks down and mumbles, 'don't remember'.

You never knew what to do if you saw him, he'd spring out at you and, as Annie says, he could be polite but would want a greeting, small talk or he became affronted. Inside knowledge helped. For instance, though he didn't like me reading stories he pored over my 'Eyewitness Account' book of lions. He said he wanted to fight one. He respected wildlife, he said. One day I was coming back from school, crossing the green, and saw him sat half-naked in the centre where all the paths converge. He sprang up when he saw me. Behind him the sun made scratched blinding circles on all the windows and I focused on Rachel's-fourth floor, left corner--to keep out of eye contact. He was breathing heavily, fists curled. I knew he didn't know who I was; I could have been Robocop stood in front of him.

'Nick', I said. 'I've been thinking about those killer bees you warned me about'. (Once in a paternal mood he'd told me how to survive an attack--basically don't run). His face changed. It was always just one emotion, in this case puzzlement, followed by joy. 'You've seen some', he said and his body relaxed. 'I knew it. Knew it'.

About this time Nick got into an empty flat and invited two tramps to live with him, and the next day one of them was found floating in the reservoir quite near the sofa the Fowlers heaved in the day before. The other tramp, still alive (now our basement dweller) but beaten couldn't remember anything and Nick was shouting 'kings and warriors, kings and warriors', blood on his upheld hands. He was sectioned and finally out of our lives about the same time as Darren came along and the resident's association set up and, gradually, things improved.

We heard Nick had escaped from the secure unit and, presumably making his way back to the block, climbed into the electricity substation and electrocuted himself. The women speculate as to whether it was suicide or whether he expected to get some charge from the electric, to turn into the superman he wanted to be, and fly like a streak through the sky, stars scattering behind him. So now I can hang out, Darren encourages me. I'm not with the cool guys you understand, brake-driving at the far end of the grass, spraying mud at the cheering audience, but with the girls, girls who aren't cool enough to be closer to the scene. Amongst them Rachel. At the last party we stood close and moved our heads in time rather than dance together to 'I Love You Stop' which her mother, sobbing over Nick (it was a year, to the day, since his death), kept putting on, again and again. Rachel said, 'You won't catch me crying over a man'.

Now, outside, she is sneering again--up at the cars and holding her ears. 'Bloody big dating ritual,' she says. She says that in Peru the boys attract girl's attention by throwing stones at them. She can't see much difference here. I agree. I find it difficult to talk. A few days ago she was in Levis and boots but now she stands knees apparent, face like a crescent moon through the dark lick of hair that curls against her face. We talk about Darren. I tell her he's got a big load coming in today so things

will be good. I tell her I've got the last of his homegrown--'a creeper'--and we walk off round the block to see the reservoir and smoke leaning against the railings. I refrain from pointing out the moonlight and starlight broken across the top of the choppy water; instead I talk of my 'job' for Darren. How I had to know all the comings and goings as his lookout. She says and now you're on the lookout for me. She says she's been thinking deeply lately and maybe I could help her decide something. 'Yeah, yeah', I say like a Beatle, watching headlights wind up the hill across the lake.

She says come on then and climbs the rail on to the concrete lip of the reservoir. We run along it, her first, arms out like a bomber pilot, the dust and gravel we disturb tips down the side, crinkling the water. I follow the stripe of her upturned trainers. She follows the route round the reservoir to the culvert then heads inland to where the trees would hide us from the thousand window eyes of the flats. We pass the substation with its yellow 'Danger of Death' sign broken in half.

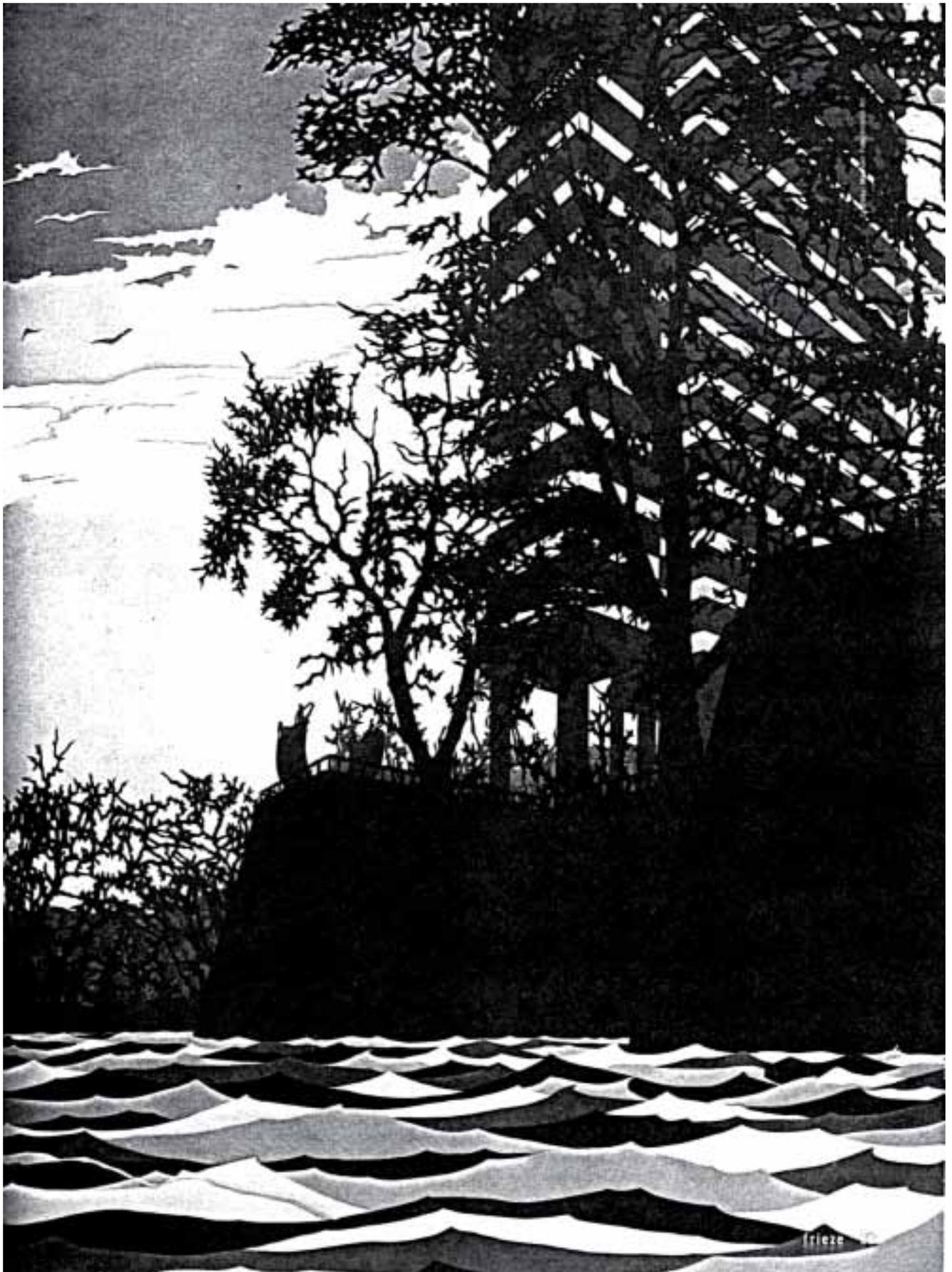
I know where we're headed. For some reason after the crash they never cleared away the care which is now part of the landscape, bushes growing up through the engine. Inside the seats are used by lovers or as a doss for those who need it or a place to sniff glue with your mates. A boy and a girl together only head there for one thing. As we get close we slow listening to hear if someone else is there, if we could hear above the noise of the traffic that sweeps by above us.

'You know why we're here don't you?' she says. 'Well, I hoped', I say. We get in through the doorless side into the back seats that she first cleared of debris. We can see the three blocks through the glassless back window. 'Darren thinks they look like those thin cigarette packets'. 'Will you shup up about him'. She makes some moves. We kiss, touch. Well, she kisses my neck but avoids my face except for one quick brush of the lips. Today she's wearing a sending-home-from-school skirt but she slaps my hand when it goes to the hem.

'You're not doing anything to me', she says. 'This is my night. I want to see yours'. She had chosen me, I saw, of all males, for the fact of my compliance. She takes out my cock and examines it like a scientist, screwing up her eyes to see in the reflected light. She feels it grow in her hand and turns up her nose. She yanks and pulls at it and peels it until I have to say careful and then 'you'd better get something'. She points it out the car but the stuff still gets on her hands. She gets out to wipe herself on the grass. I lie back.

'Put it away then', she says. I'd been quite impressed seeing it grow bigger than I'd ever seen before, but I don't think she was. She tells me as we walk back through scrub, which in childhood I had pictured as African veldt, that she has decided, and I helped. She was going to be a lesbian.

It's then that I notice what I should have before--an unusual amount of traffic coming off the flyover and heading for our estate. No blue lights or sirens but there are motorbikes. I tell Rachel I've got to run, she runs with me, fast as I am, faster, knowing the quickest way and leading me round dead ends I would have taken. We're still too late. We stop when we see what's happening, emerging from the wasteland. We have our arms round each other catching our breath as Darren, not handcuffed but flanked by policemen walks out and down the steps of Spencer tower. I look up to see mum at the balcony screaming down at the tops of heads but with the noise around, motorbikes running, a crowd gathering, no one can hear what she's saying.



**CASEY KAPLAN**  
121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Maloney, Martin, the art of David Thorpe,  
*Frank*, June 1998, p141.



## the art of David Thorpe

It's that time of year when interested parties troop around the London art schools in search of the Next Big Thing. If many career oriented young artists are using their graduation shows as calling cards for the trade, the more astute among them have now gone even further and entered the network of showing and selling.

David Thorpe will not graduate from the Goldsmiths' MA course until September, but there's already been some serious interest in his work. His first London showing of paper cutouts at City Racing in February 1997 drew attention to a new spirit in British art; a gentle and playfully romantic one. Within the year, he had a successful solo show in Habitat's King's Road store and was exhibiting in Vienna, Graz and Cologne. This January, he made his West End debut at the Stephen Friedman Gallery. Not bad for someone who, after graduating from Hull's SA course, spent two years in Brockley wondering how to make his mark.

'Claude Lorrain's trees are feathery and Caspar David Friedrich's aggressive,' Thorpe announces, by way of introduction to his own images of romantic landscapes. There has been a change from earlier picturesque scenes (lakes, castles and trees) to an urban romanticisation of flyovers, lower blocks and underpasses. Thorpe himself is inspired by areas of south-east London: 'I am interested in the grandiose, the modern and urban,' he explains.

Thorpe creates his pictures by cutting coloured paper into silhouetted shapes. In *We Never Sleep* (left), blacks, dark blues and orange-yellows predominate, and complex relationships between foreground and middle ground are explored through perspective and drawing. The work seems modest in technique and heroic in subject matter. 'I want it to look like I took my art lessons seriously... but I hope they are skilled enough to cause some wonder.'

Thorpe's lightness of touch transforms the grim reality of urban sprawl into something staged. He believes he can show the wonder of the 20th-century city: 'A modernist lower block can look mysterious and enchanting at night,' he says.

Thorpe is part of a backlash against the angry, in-your-face protest work of the BritArt group: 'My work is delicate: he explains, 'in contrast to the macho permanence of lower blocks.' In this way, real life seems to be giving way to the fairy-tale pretence of life as it would like to be seen. 'When I look at art, I want to see that the artists have had some fun in making their work; that it has been done in the easiest way.' Martin Maloney David Thorpe's work appears in Part One of *Printemps*, running until May 23rd at Deutsch Britische Freundschaft, Unit 6/7, 42-44 De Beauvoir Crescent, London N1. Tel (0171) 923 9439 for details.

Photograph Henry Bourne

**CASEY KAPLAN**

121 WEST 27TH STREET  
NEW YORK NY 10001  
TEL +1 212 645 7335  
FAX +1 212 645 7835  
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM  
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Beech, Dave, Sociable Realism,  
*Art Monthly*, March 1998.

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David Thorpe  
Kings of the Night  
1998  
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■ Sociable Realism

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Stephen Friedman Gallery London  
January 30 to February 28  
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Painting is vibrant at the moment. With none of the defensiveness which has so often accompanied painting for the last 30 years, this is a cocky exhibition. It is hung like a picture essay, emphasizing the breadth of style and focus of themes rather than the depth of achievement of individuals. Each artist shows one piece, and this includes the curator, Paul Noble. His painting greets you at the door and warns you not to expect probity and tenderness.

It is a little painting of an unlikely row of artworld blokes stood in the car park of a pub. They are all wanking. Stranger still, they are all coming at the same time. It is an adolescent drama of virility that turns out to be a sweet gesture of harmony and equality. A pathetic display nonetheless, their ritual seems to be a deliberate attack on genital pleasure in the name of phallic power. Rather than gaining some heroic aura from this, though, these blokes look silly. Presumably the choice of artists is significant but couldn't identify them all. There is a gap in the line, so if you think someone ought to be included you can imagine him buying the next round. But who deserves to join this gang? Are these blokes meant to stand out as the wankers of the artworld or do they stand for artists in general who are all

wankers? Or is this painting a pre-emptive apology for the laddish indulgencies of the exhibition?

All nine artists in the show are male. This does not in itself mean that the works are uniformly macho but, in so far as most of the exhibition is taken up with boys' pastimes, the works which might elsewhere come across differently get sucked into what might be termed the masculinist stream. Jason Fox's painted duvet holds the thematic centre of the exhibition, placing us in the imaginative world of a teenage boy's bedroom. The duvet itself combines both popular and knowing references (the latter not limited to Rauschenberg, but interestingly also Pollock's vertical presentation of works made horizontally). The painting has the appearance of a heavy-metal fan's elaborately doodled maths exercise-book cover. It seems natural that the picture is crowned with the word 'Floyd', except that Pink Floyd's artwork was always more surreal than corporeal.

The most surprising contribution to the show is Eric Wright's tasteless pastiche of a book cover for a romance novel. It is painted with painstaking struggle rather than joy and the image is too cheap to deserve the labour. A fantasy couple embrace in natural surroundings but they look comically dated. In fact they look like the lead singers of the 70s group Guys 'n' Dolls. It may not be the best painting here but it is the picture that gave me the most pleasure.

David Rayson's domestic interior is poised uneasily between observational reality and hyperreal invention. Everyday objects sit in an ordinary setting, and the details are convincing but something is wrong. Is it the lighting that gives it the sense of existing only in someone's head? Looking at this painting is like overhearing someone talking to himself. Psychologically, this is the most complex work in the show. It is also one of the smallest pictures here. Mark Titchner's wall painting, on the other hand, wants to be an installation. It serves as the background for two ugly paintings, perhaps only to make this point, but it is not allowed to interfere with anyone else's work. Being based on the pattern or the wallpaper in his parents' house, it adds weight to the feeling that this show is conceived around an apparent overlap between the exploration of new resources for painting and a nostalgia for boyhood indulgencies (though Titchner's work is one of those which would look less gender specific in another environment).

I may be mistaken but it seems to me that these painters have not entirely recovered from the prolonged abuse of painting and have embraced various forms of irresponsibility instead of heading off criticism with tactics such as the use of irony. The idea that painting is anachronistic has itself become old-fashioned, and yet it is as if painting is asking not to be taken too seriously. The title of the exhibition, 'Sociable Realism', is a playful instance of this by substituting relaxation where once there was politics and duty. Like Noble's painting, the title is an excuse of sorts but it is also a well-aimed swipe at the threat of theory and sobriety.

What is striking about David Thorpe's twilight cityscape is its clean, sharp newness. Since Blade-runner the future has lost this utopian smartness, and the destiny of modern design is now more usually figured as ruined by dirt, decay, breakdown, underfunding and dystopia. Thorpe instead retains a naive technophilia and an uncorrupted confidence in modern design. However, the nostalgia for a past whose future was optimistic doesn't get beyond the

drawing-board here, as Thorpe's utopianism fails to become a project or artistic and social transformation. His lovely pictures of modern architecture could not be further from their artistic counterparts. The paradox is obvious: he is nostalgic for modernist formalism and avant-garde innovation without doing either.

There is a less palpable nostalgia in Martin O'Hare's complete tattoo, similar to James Pyman's Kennel. Each vaguely resembles a comic strip scene (O'Hare's looks a bit like King of the Hill gone mystical, and Pyman's looks like Snoopy's home), but more importantly, the naivety of their styles harks back to the time before art college when you drew for pleasure and to show off your skills. Barry Reigate's day-glo airbrush painting is boyhood painting writ large. And it is its apparent innocence which makes it affectionate and warm despite its glossy industrial commercialism. Boyishness, nostalgia and irresponsible indulgence are not merely certain persistent themes then: they go to the heart of their practices.

Dave Beech is an artist.