'HONK IF YOU'RE JESUS'

Private View Thursday 6 February 6 - 8pm
Exhibition Friday 7 February - Saturday 8 March
Monday - Friday 10am - 6pm
Saturday 11am - 6pm

'Honk if you're Jesus' selects ten works by six British artists who all came to prominence in the early 1990s. This was a period when contemporary art in Britain came under heightened journalistic scrutiny and commentary – often focusing on the transgressive nature of art produced by a small group of so-called Young British Artists. This exhibition at Paul Stolper Gallery portrays a different side of the story. Using text as the basis for their work, the artists in this exhibition demonstrate how the new realisms of 90s art were often filtered by an adroit application of conceptual strategies. Their works suggest new ways that art might communicate particular narratives or meanings while also disowning the conventional boundaries of the art object by virtue of its manifestation as a trace of performative acts.

Douglas Gordon's *List of Names (compiled January 1992)* 1990-ongoing, and Fiona Banner's *Don't Look Back* 1999, are the results of acts of memory. Gordon's work exists as a wall drawing (permanently sited at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art) and as a sequence of paper editions, consisting of the names of everyone Gordon has met, or rather can remember having met. Fallibility and human error are part of the work, with mistakes built into the process – misremembering or forgetting certain names. In 1990 this list stood at 1440 names, in 1991, the work numbered 1705 names and in 1992, 1850 names. Memorialisation is a key strand throughout Gordon's work and his *List of Names* marks a turning point in his work, as he finished his MA at the Slade in London, returning to Glasgow not long afterwards. It acts as a roll of honour for his family, firm friendships as well as glancing acquaintances, and the beginnings of his professional life as an artist. The work provides the coordinates for the networks through which Gordon has conceived his art as one that emerges from a social space, as a set of conversations.

Taking D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film about Bob Dylan's 1965 British tour as its starting point, Banner's triptych is an exemplar for the way in which many artists of her generation have used popular culture not so much as subject, but as a medium for communicating a range of meanings and expressions. Banner wrote out her memory of the film three times to see if she could remember more each time. This process highlights memory's fragility – each text starts the same way but then shifts and changes, as if each text was even apparently written from different points of view – each written-out memory becoming itself a memory. For the reader, the resulting monolithic form of the three separate blocks of text, serve to defeat reading. It is virtually impossible to read from one line to the next, instead only snatches of text can really be caught, describing fleeting moments of the film – in some respect this is a by-product of the action of Banner's memory to recall the film in terms of pictures and images rather than as a strict sequential linear narrative. Constructed from memory, the form of the work emulates, through such flaws and misdirection as well as epiphany, the action of memory for the viewer, in effect to challenge the idea that memory is somehow true or definitive.

Popular culture as medium is a common thread through this exhibition. Jeremy Deller's early work *John, Paul, George-please, Ringo, Brian, Never 4-Get Stu* 1992, reproduces graffiti found and photographed by Deller at Abbey Road that exists as memorial for The Beatles, but also for the enduring love felt for them by their fans – and it is explicitly the meaning of the fans' love for The Beatles that Deller's work marks and celebrates. It prefigures both his more recent works revolving around Brian Epstein, and also, more significantly, his collaborations with fans of the Manic Street Preachers which led to his 1997 exhibition and 1999 book *The Uses of Literacy*, and the *Unconvention* exhibition and event in Cardiff also in 1999. By concentrating on the ways fans express themselves, and the kinds of communities they form, this work is also an indication of the ways in which Deller has continued to build his work through conversations, collaboration and engagement with diverse social groupings on the understanding that all forms of popular culture are socially (and politically) determining. This outlook underpinned his flow-diagram drawing *History of the World* 1996 that provided the conceptual framework for *Acid Brass*, a project in which Deller invited traditional brass bands to perform Acid House music. The editioned artwork is based on Deller's drawing illustrating how he perceived a network of pop cultural and historical links between the miners' strike and the start of the acid house scene. Exhibited in his first solo exhibition in London in 1991, his textual photo-piece, *Poem* 1991, now seems from another age – the language used in the inside front cover of a British passport is in many ways a declaration of British exceptionalism. Presented in a form suggestive of ransom-note lettering (each letter photographed from London street signs), the declaration also takes on an enhanced meaning for a Britain after Brexit, bookended by Deller's recent film *Putin's Happy*, 2019 and his *Fuck Brexit* t-shirt range of the same year, such as *John&Paul&George&FuckBrexit*.

The manner in which Deller brings different categories, disciplines and attitudes together in *History of the World* to communicate meaning, can also be recognised in the work of Simon Patterson where pre-existing systems of categorisation or ordering (for instance a London tube map, in his print *The Great Bear* 1992) are imposed on unexpected subjects (not underground stations but different kinds of famous people), allowing us to see the world, and its illusory constructs differently. *Zoetrope* 1997 is from a group of paintings, all to the same format where eight utopias from movies and myth – Xanadu, Oz, Shangri-La, Cockaigne, Nirvana, Eldorado, 7th Heaven and Cloud 9 – assume different planetary trajectories anchored within a portrayal of the electromagnetic spectrum visible to the human eye. The titles of each painting in the series – *Zoetrope*, *Cinerama*, *Panavision*, *CinemaScope*, *White Light* – emphasises the ways that illusions of reality and desire are created through the silver screen. *Zoetrope* is a scaled down version of his wall drawing *First Circle* 1996, shown within his installation for the Turner Prize that year.

Banner's letter transposition in *This is not a love snog* 2000 sits somewhere between an anagram and a spoonerism, transforming the classic Public Image Ltd song into spray-painted graffitied sign. Where John Lydon met the criticism levelled at him for being a sellout head-on with a song celebrating his apparent cynicism, 'I'm going over to the other side / I'm happy to have, not to have not / Big business is very wise / I'm inside free enterprise/ This is not a love song', Banner's deft shift of 'song' to 'snog' directly reflects Lydon's strategies.

The direct humour of Banner's sign also reflects the word blindness, ineptitude and ennui that pervades much of Bob and Roberta Smith's sign paintings from the 1990s – whether these catalogue a life lived on the margins of the art world retold in *1st March* 1997, or the fictional pratfalls such as that documented in *Teddy Kennedy Visited Harold Wilson…* 1997. Smith's sign paintings revel in their ordinariness and matter-of-factness, while their form draws on the significance and authenticity found in folk art and craft, and their subject relies on a disarming irreverence and humour to transport the viewer. The text in *Teddy Kennedy Visited Harold Wilson…*, like many similar works by Smith from this date, relates a fictional anecdote to present a half-truth as fact, in such a way that may also question the authority of the author. From the contemporary perspective of fake news, information disorder and the current demise of fact-checking on social media, the strategy of these works takes on a disturbing prescience. However, by contrast, for Smith these signs, and the making and displaying of them, also exist as a backdrop to an activity that sees cultural and artistic activity as essential to a fully functioning society, and has seen him more recently campaigning for art's place on the national curriculum, his formation of the Art Party in 2013, his campaign against Michael Gove at the 2015 General Election and his belief that 'All schools should be art schools' – just as he was exhorting in 1997 at the time of these signs: 'Don't hate, sculpt' and 'Make Art Not War'.

Such a concern with popular culture offers a route into the workings of the collective imagination. One result was to highlight those things we think we know and understand, and show that we don't. Similarly, turning the 'known' on its head, displacing categories and hierarchies, is to reveal the 'known' as a portal to the strange and the unknown, if perhaps vaguely familiar. *Honk if you're Jesus* 1991 is one of a number of hand-painted decals, or *'Stick-errs'*, that Chodzko intended to be applied to his *Untitled Stile (Teenage Version)* 1991 – a carved and heavily lacquered stile – a rural trail boundary marker and crossing point – isolated and fetishised as an urban teenage countercultural meeting point. Customised by a *'Stick-err'*, the stile could be additionally charged as a site of agency. The very particular message *Honk if you're Jesus* along with its secular demotic framing as a kind of bumper sticker, was an echo of his *God Lookalike Contest* 1991-2, suggesting that belief (and not necessarily religious belief) is at the heart of any cohesive society. For the *God Lookalike Contest*, Chodzko placed an advertisement in the free classified-ad magazine *Loot* seeking contact with people who thought they looked like God. *Loot* became a rich hunting ground for Chodzko through the 1990s as a way of finding and defining different identities and communities. For the edition of *Loot* for November 6/7, 1998, he placed three advertisements that would form a part of his *Inverter (Clearance Sale)* 1999. These ads placed in different sections ('Collecting and Hobbies' for a wing, fancy costume and duck – 'No time wasters please'; 'Women's Clothing' for a 'v plain and flat looking' dress'; and 'DIY Building Materials' for sand, decorative sticks, paint) catalogued the constituent parts of an Adler jewellery advertisement in the November edition of the society lifestyle magazine *Harpers & Queen*. By offering the aspirational contents of the Adler advertisement in *Loot* they are recast as tawdry, matter-of fact and lacklustre. In *Harpers & Queen* the objects that Chodzko characterises as 'v plain' or 'useful for gardening/fencing' are the props for lifestyle fantasy. Systems of representation becoming both confused and revealed anew.

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