

Islands

Richard Ducker and Gibson/Martelli

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Coleman Project Space, London, SE16

Paul O’Kane

London’s unequalled enthusiasm for art long-ago produced the phenomenon of the small shop in a relatively un-renowned part of the city that has been converted into a gallery space. Coleman Project Space in Bermondsey is a good example. Its particular architectural form determines to some extent the works here presented as well as the way in which we encounter them. A critical visitor to this show might strain to perceive connections between these works that allows them to be brought together under the evocative title *Islands*, but the process of determining a homogenising rationale can be a rewarding and creative act in itself as the mind builds imaginative bridges between apparently irreconcilable, or at least clearly heterogeneous elements.

Stepping through the little shop door of Coleman Project Space the visitor finds their senses immersed in the transformative effects provided by Astro Turf – a vivid green, hyperreal imitation grass that forms a contextual carpet for Richard Ducker’s *Dark Matter Flowers* (2013/14). But it may be the contrast created by the sparse arrangement of slightly sinister looking black objects that really makes the space feel estranged. On closer inspection, the black forms turn out to be various panels of crashed cars, gleaned from scrap yards then subjected to the process known as flocking, in which a fine layer of coloured felt is sprayed on to and affixed to a surface. Unreflective matt black flocking awards Ducker’s sharp-angled car panels a slight sense of melancholy, as if mourning the loss of their commodity status and their cultural position as part of the lovingly polished bodywork of some suburban hero’s pride and joy. The objects are arranged in a sparse configuration that allows the audience to walk among them, with due care and consideration, like visitors to some sci-fi cemetery. Most are floor-bound but others hark down from the ceiling, their sharp modern geometry suggesting crystals, stalactites and stalagmites. The former shop begins to feel cave-like, but the specially installed artificial light combines with title of Ducker’s work to lead our interpretive reading closer to the idea of a malignant garden. Thus the artist plays with the notion of sculpture as prop, the gallery as theatre or theme park, and with suburbia as a simulacral environment while also hinting at the 21st century artist’s limited ability to compete with or emulate the panoply of fantasy worlds and dreamscapes readily available to us via ubiquitous video game technology.

Having tip-toed through this installation, the viewer passes on through what were once the back room of the shop and its back yard into a large shed or disused workshop. Inside, Gibson/Martelli (the collaboration by artists Ruth Gibson and Bruno Martelli, formerly known as ‘Iglloo’) have some surprises waiting for us. An inflated and tethered weather balloon occupies a significant part of the space. Projected on its moon-like surface we can watch *Perfect Circle* (2013), a film made from a camera fixed on a ship as it turns 360 degrees in an arctic seascape. The artists are obliquely referring to a well-know obsession of Renaissance artists but perversely translating it to this remote and desolate location while applying an odd mix of technologies. The video camera and sailing vessel together try to achieve what Renaissance artists all too often failed to do with a pencil, paper, a trained hand and a disciplined mind.

Nearby in the dark space we discover a Virtual Reality headset dangling from overhead joists, and next to it a taut rope fixed between floor and ceiling. Donning the headset we immediately leave behind the real world of the shed and find ourselves magically transported by convincing sounds and moving images representing a blizzard, through and beyond which snow-bound mountains seem to be passing before and beneath us. This is *White Island* (2014), also by Gibson/Martelli, and as we grip the (real) rope beside us we make a strange liaison between one world and another, as well as between forms of internal and external experience. We soon realise that we are expected to (virtually) pilot a (virtual) air balloon ride across the intimidating arctic landscape. The rope, we instinctively, empirically learn, acts like a joystick. Pulling with an upward, downward or sideways emphasis affects the apparent height and direction of our (virtual) vehicle – as evoked in the convincing image of a wicker basket creaking beneath our feet. We are thus entrusted with the task of enjoying the ride while avoiding (virtual) disaster. In fact, the work draws on a doomed Polar balloon expedition of 1897 when, attempting to reach the Pole by balloon, the intrepid S. A. Andr e’s balloon crashed, and all three expedition members died. Gibson/Martelli conscientiously researched this journey and built their own digital version for us to relive it. Of course, unlike the real balloonists, we have the option of being able to remove our headset and return to the real, relatively comfortable surroundings of a safe South London back yard.

In the combined works and artists that constitute ‘Islands’ a brave leap in the direction of hyperreality is consistently, knowingly, willingly, ironically and strategically - albeit symbolically - undermined by historical materiality. It is as if Jean Baudrillard, having leapfrogged Karl Marx, is himself leapfrogged by Marx again as plain old reality persistently clings on to its own existence and continues to confront us with all those problematics of history that Walter Benjamin - perhaps more artfully than anyone before or since - mapped in his labyrinthine *Theses on a Philosophy of History*. Despite our screened-out, virtualised lives, we are still reliant on increasingly ephemeral hardware that rapidly breaks down and wears out, and so, from the cracked surface of our smartphones to the 70s-styled coffee bar in which we scroll through our Instagram and facebook updates, we remain consistently bound by our built environment and thus constantly re-engaged with both the most recent past and more distant, increasingly mythologised histories. Today, even something as apparently futuristic as Virtual Reality has taken on a kind of retro patina in the same way that Walter Benjamin noted, in his 1928 essay on Surrealism, that “railways are beginning to age” while beginning to recognise “the revolutionary energies that appear in the outmoded”.

The artists in *Islands* seem to subject us to a strange interplay of times and processes as Ducker’s textured and tangible references make a consciously half-hearted attempt to deliver us into a hyperreal, virtual and futural non-place while, conversely, Gibson/Martelli transport us to the specific Victorian scenario of a true adventure, but only by virtual means that simultaneously convince us and invite us to ‘see through’ their contrivance. Heroism may be yet another concept that connects the various ‘Islands’ on show here, whether in the guise of Gibson/Martelli’s intrepid arctic explorer or the implied figure of a suburban ‘hero’ of postmodern life whose aim to perhaps create the perfect lawn or bring out the most enviable shine is thwarted or surpassed by Ducker’s material translations and transformations.

Rather than 'Islands' - we might be so bold as to suggest - an alternative concept, equally applicable to Richard Ducker's and Gibson/Martelli's assembled works, could be that of 'Histories' as, in subtle and surprising ways, the works here evoke our current sense of an unexpectedly complex, and possibly failed, negotiation with both future and past. Gibson/Martelli's Virtual Reality work strangely transports us to a Victorian scenario wherein explorers tested the limits of their very own exciting and unprecedented technologies. Their 'Perfect Circle' similarly leads us from the present into the 16th Century, and back again. Meanwhile, Richard Ducker's 'Dark Matter Flowers' relates the rather grand concept of history to the relatively mundane nexus of designed obsolescence and suburban desire that keeps consumerism and technology powering along with no sense of responsibility to its, or our future.

A visitor might therefore leave this show wondering what the original customers of the little shop would think of the twisted and buckled version of their manifold possible futures we have currently come to inhabit, but also slightly haunted by the ghosts of those early consumers, as thoughts of them remind us that we too will only be so much faded and inaccurately represented reality before very long.