

# Phantom at Ruskin Gallery, Cambridge

26 January – 18 February 2017

A review by Laurence Noga

All Photos: J. Boyer

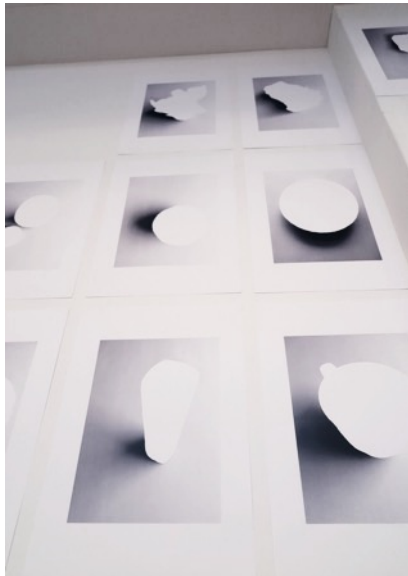


Figure and Ground ©Rachel Smith 2016

There are lines of command in the current exhibition, *Phantom* at Ruskin Gallery; these shifts or modifications are not directed by the exhibition curator, Jane Boyer, but occur through the power of collective translation by the artists in the show. Boyer initially chose a single work from each artist, allowing a chain of reaction to develop from that choice. In opening out the spatial matrix of the gallery, she allows the viewer to respond through sensory cues, and the conversations activated by the works themselves.

Polyphony (a musical term), was first introduced by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal book *Problems of Dostoyevsky*. Bakhtin argued for the concept of a polyphonic narrative; which allows for a diversity of opinion and viewpoint within a dialogue of different voices. He believed in a vision passing through several lines of communication, merging layers and traces of meaning.

In this show that visual struggle and convergence of image, language, and site, is key to the exhibition's success. We recognize current American and Russian military tensions, but it is the installation and the way it creates a distortion of aesthetic experience that introduces the 'simulacrum.'

I like the way the idea of 'simulacrum' slowly permeates our thinking through individual representation or approach to the real. Boyer points this out in the work of Rachel Smith "She digitally removes the object, turning the shadow into an object, which is the very thing it is not". Smith's photographic prints hold our gaze through their repetition and sense of recollection. We feel her labour, and physical endurance. The cancelling out of each object reveals a new kind of presence.



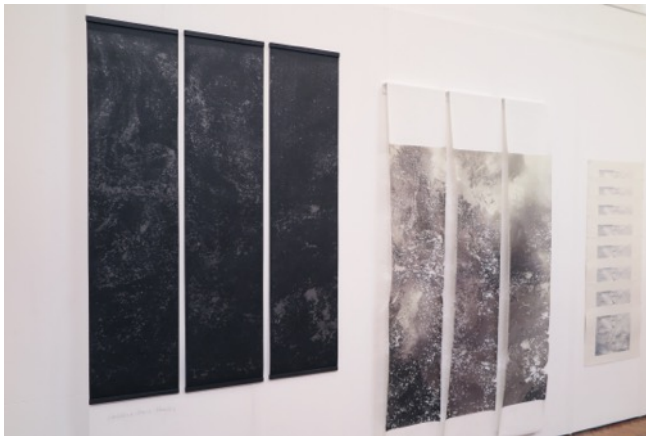
Threaded ©Holly Rowan Hesson 2017

In Holly Rowan Hesson's enigmatic three screen installation *Threaded*, with twenty looped images per screen, the interweaving of the curator's initial selection is incorporated into the whole. The merging and bleeding of colour feels both bodily, and part of a visceral terrain, as transparent pink collides with a magenta, and deeper reds. The synthesis of structure and image within the material site elicits a locality of memory, everything sinking in and accumulating, like in an early Helen Frankenthaler painting such as *The Bay*, 1963.



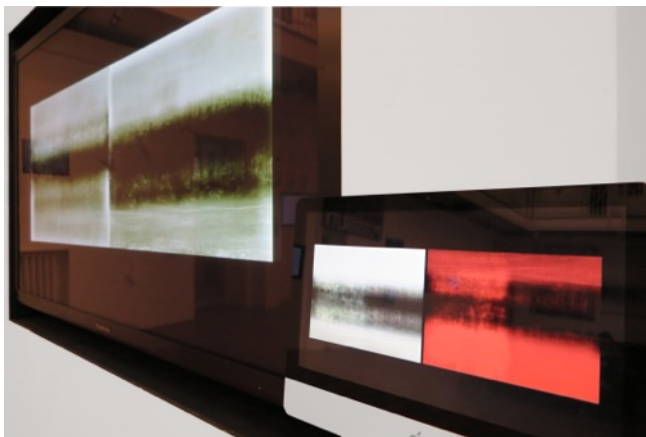
L to R: *A Consultation* ©Marion Piper 2016, *Reaching for Art* ©Marion Piper 2017, *A Successor* ©Marion Piper 2016

The sinking and spreading of colour is important to Marion Piper. Her open approach to geometry is part of the operation. In Piper's hands, *A Successor* (pencil on board) is fluid, and the grid and physical structure is dislocated in a seamless manner by the striations of colour. The smaller intimate moments across the surface, pull us into the qualities of the painting and its spatial articulations. The luminosity that Piper is able to conjure, contains an emotional specificity. The structural devices in the installation of these works alter the reading.



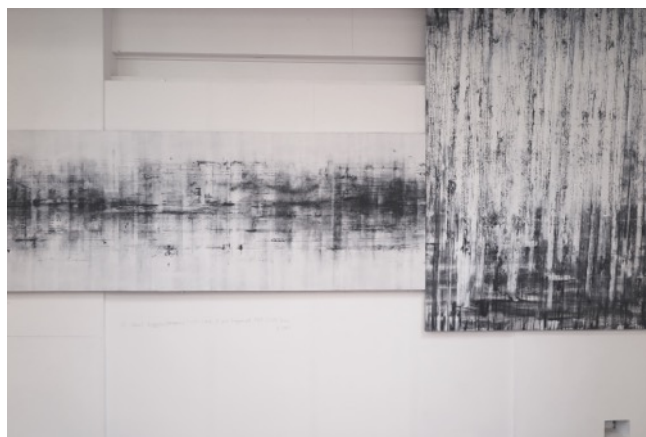
L: *Slow Data (Hard Copy)* ©Caroline Jane Harris 2017 R: *At the Moment of Being Seen* ©Caroline Jane Harris 2015. Far R: *centre-fold* ©Julia Court 2015

Perpendicularity and the relationship to the space are interlocked in Caroline Jane Harris' work. Harris approaches her work systematically to reveal a network of in-between spaces. Hand cutting often into archival pigment prints, but in this case into pigment prints on Kozo paper. The digitalized images often of nature, are given another layer of coding. Altering information and communication that concentrates the viewer on space and time and the new kind of logic.



L: *Uncertain* ©Tim Skinner 2017 R: *Ever Drifting in Uncertainty* ©Tim Skinner

*Uncertain*, Tim Skinner's single channel video diptych, creates an immediate connection to something that is lost. Skinner uses a heightened sense of memory in his approach to the contemporary sublime. He presents us with a recurring temporal structure. Its compelling universal experience makes us feel edgy and slightly nervous. Its smaller companion *Ever Drifting in Uncertainty* seems to be echoing a simultaneous experience. But if you stand close to the smaller work its pace and colour is sharper, the site revealed slowly and hypnotically, whilst the larger work becomes a more abstract field. The painterly concerns chromatically muted, flicker and gently reconfigure the space.



L: *Fall-line* ©Kate Palmer 2008 R: *Fall-line (sluff)* ©Kate Palmer 2016

Kate Palmer's work *Fall-line (Sluff)* opposite Skinner's, balances out the gallery space with its similar proportions and sense of composition. Palmer sites her work in the alpine ski slopes, but it is the way she situates your attention on the ground-consciousness as she works the surface, that activates the codes of



Through the Looking Glass ©Julia Court 2017

like *colored alphabet* by Jasper Johns painted in 1959. His use of collage and oil paint gives his work a weight and autonomy because of his powerful understanding of hierarchical colour. I enjoyed the way in which Hare tightens this up a bit, and makes the text have sculptural authority. That feeling of imbalance and discomfort brought about by the mixed media, opens up a breadth of compositional possibilities to allow a series to emerge.

representation. Almost indistinguishable her gestures slip in and out of focus pursuing a ghostly tension. Palmer always takes on ambitious scale, and rides a thin line between the painting working or disintegrating from the continual 'rub-outs,' and 'put-backs.'

With Julia Court the domestic space is fused into something that is both familiar and metaphysical. Her projection, *Through the Looking Glass*, acquires a distancing, suspending or freezing of the original common place object. There is a phenomenological action working on the audience, because Court's approach to her memory images have a humour, questioning the object's use and identity.

*Less* by Niki Hare calls to mind a work



L: *Phant* ©Niki Hare 2016 T: *Less* ©Niki Hare 2017 B: *Pha* ©Niki Hare 2016 Far L: *Threaded* ©Holly Rowen Hesson 2017



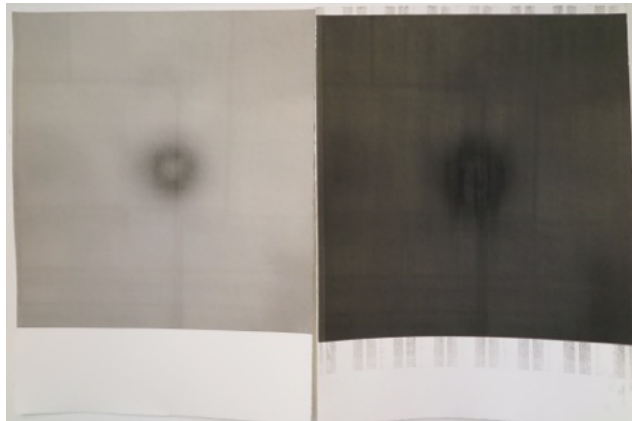
Kirsty Harris ©2017

A different kind of series exists in Kirsty Harris's five paintings, which all depict bombs exploded by countries with nuclear capabilities. Harris has a diverse practice in terms of media. For example, drawings are often made on oak blocks. For this show Harris responded with a series of flag works in oil on linen. In some ways, Harris has frozen the cold war period (protect and survive) and it feels important that she often attended CND rallies with her family in the Thatcher era. But with these paintings, like the twin tower paintings by Gerhard Richter, it's their fragility, beauty, and particularly their brutality that give the work a new political context.

Jane Boyer isolated individual areas in her original drawing *Versions: Matrix*. These small areas of site were chosen, and re-grown like shadows of the original image. It feels important for Boyer to have

used a mechanical process in realising her digitally compressed images. Boyer talked me through these powerfully sited twin prints in the gallery, "in the first print all seven layers are printed together as a single image. In the second print each layer is printed individually, as seven unique passes through the printer."

In this way, the number of passes that the curator has put the whole exhibition through, including handwritten aphorisms



Ground Zero ©Jane Boyer 2017



next to each work, creates a synthesized dialogue between aspects of thought, language, and the visual impact of the hang. The gallery becomes the place to contemplate, to pass through, to exchange thoughts concerning the power of translation.



*Phantom* at Ruskin Gallery, Cambridge School of Art, 2017 ©Jane Boyer

The power of translation was given further resonance through *The Voices*, a narrative poem written and performed by author Caron Freeborn specifically for *Phantom* in response to the artworks in the exhibition. Freeborn was invited by Boyer to compose and perform *The Voices* as the keynote address for the project symposium. Responding to the problematic convergence of language and images, Freeborn's protagonists, Helen and Bill, were betrayed by faulty speech mechanics, relying on visual translations to communicate. The fatal misinterpretation of those communications underscored the complexity of translation and the illusive readability of the works in the exhibition.

Laurence Noga 2017