

date: Confused, Excited, Anxious, Exhausted. *The Monkey Picture* is a large panel apparently showing a telepathic test between a man and a monkey. These works raise questions about the connections between mind and body, and the representation of biological and mental processes, but beyond this a pronounced yet whimsical air of the past hangs about them. The bare setting and old fittings of the room in *The Monkey Picture* are enough to date the scene. We look back from the digital age to the archaeologically distant world of analogue recording (of LPs and reel-to-reel tapes, of film itself) and also to a world of jejeune empiricism where no mystery could not be fathomed and when data still had weight, both in its media and in its differentiated significance.

Don Brown and Stephen Murphy, also at the Lisson, use digital photography directly. Brown's large colour landscapes of mountain scenes seem conventional only at first glance, for the viewer quickly realises that their blurry forms are artificial and that these symmetrical compositions are calculated platitudes. As it becomes apparent that similar elements are repeated across each picture, these grand panoramas shrink, or at least it becomes difficult to judge their scale; their lumpen assembly and fuzzy shapes are reminiscent of Gerhard

something which belongs to the distant past. Brown and Murphy take opposite paths, one producing images which fail to convince yet where everything is in place, the other images which convince yet where something seems to be wrong. Both point to the realm of universal mendacity opened up by the unlimited manipulability of information.

Digitisation should be, in a sense, the retrospective vindication of post-modern theory. Actually, it causes deep problems for those theorists who always denied that there was anything special about photographic representation, because now they have no way of seeing that something radically different is going on. Those fine art photographic practices based on distinguishing themselves from realism, yet which were ^{always} parasitic on it, may fade into the background. Others may ask what happens when all information becomes just that, when contingencies which might break with the dominant interpretation are erased. Part of an answer may be read in Murphy's *Cell*, a perfect digitised prison-house of signification, the padded silicon cell of the 'Net', I

In addition to the works discussed, 'Beyond Belief' includes pieces by Doug Aitken, Pierre Bismuth, Michael Grey, Philippe Ramette and Jane and Louise Wilson.

Henry Krokatsis
Untitled 1994



Richter's painted renditions of average amateur photographs. The practice of faking banality, of taking a sophisticated technology and producing something which is exceptional only in the very level of its banality, refers to the likely overall effect of digital manipulation for commercial uses, to drown us in a tidal wave of average perfection.

Murphy shows small prints, in black-and-white or faded colour which look just as though they had been dug out of some forgotten drawer in the family home. They show scenes of beach and garden but all are unpopulated; we see a deserted tea-table or an empty pram. To make them. Murphy digitised family snapshots and removed the people, replacing them with a plausible background sampled from the original. On close inspection, areas which slightly differ in tone give a clue to some effaced presence, the ghosts of the real. These images are both homely and creepy, a glimpse of a world depopulated after some catastrophe, or poignant images of our passing and forgetting. Like Gilded, Murphy suggests that the analogue image is

Julian Stallabrass

□ **Peter Kinley and Paul Winstanley**

James Hockey Gallery Farnham April 17 to May 21

□ Jane Harris

Anderson O'Day Gallery London April 21 to May 27

The problem of subject-matter still persists as the most important dilemma for artists. This crisis has been particularly felt by painters because the very validity of the medium itself has been brought into question. However,

the 'end of painting' debate of the 1960s and 70s, though still with us, now seems to belong to a period in which the arts were intent on rushing headlong towards some hoped-for consummation in or beyond History. This end has not come and instead we have, amongst other things, more painting. And so the question that has haunted the arts since the Enlightenment still remains to be answered in painting. What to paint?

The three artists under review each struggle with this problem: they try to make something visible which will strike the viewer as in some way plausible, coherent; appropriate, resonant. The oldest is Peter Kinley, born in 1926 in Vienna, but resident for most of his life in England where he died in 1988. His work is paired at James Hockey Gallery with the much Younger Paul Winstanley (born 1954). The juxtaposition teaches a good deal about the vicissitudes of painting over the last 30 years. Kinley's work is based upon the belief that the essential subject-matter of painting is the existential life of the painter. For him the problem is only of subject and style, not of the actual validity of the medium itself. He belongs to a generation of painters which felt a rupture with the post-Renaissance tradition and yet still remained deeply loyal to this tradition at its basic level, in that they persisted in advocating figurative, representational art even as they also acknowledged its impossibility on a purely perceptual, empirical level. Further

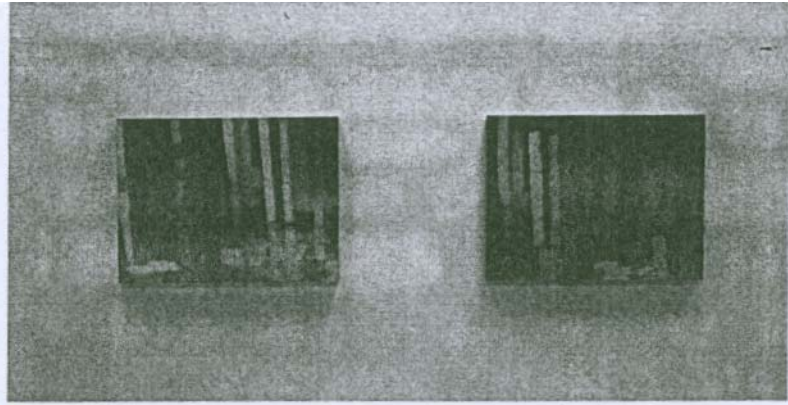
more, they believed that the well-spring of their art was an emphasis upon, and radicalisation of, their own subjectivity, their own selves as makers of meaning.

Stylistically, the development of Kinley's work in particular was assisted by encounters with traditional Indian art and in this he reflects a dominant theme in modern Western art: the yearning towards a revitalising, purifying 'primitivism' which would instil new life into the worn-out codes of Western culture. In this way, artists could identify themselves with a concept of the self radically 'other' than the debased alienated selves of mass capitalist society. For Kinley this meant a movement towards the crystallization of his own experience into simply outlined iconic images, pictograms of significant personal moments - an aeroplane flying overhead, cows in a field, a rabbit, a room. Here simplification implies innocence and authenticity: a highly sophisticated, self-conscious individual presents as his subject-matter the retrieved or recreated aura of spontaneous childlike experience. This must have been what he considered the most important function of painting - to repudiate the burden of cultured self-consciousness in order to search out the directness which, in actuality, is now only possible for the marginal or those unsocialised: children, the insane, peoples untouched by 'Western culture. Ultimately the goal is freedom from the oppressive codes of modernity and this is premised on the belief that this is possible on the basis of individual effort.

Kinley believed there were still places left to which he could escape. Paul Winstanley does not. He takes on the full burden of self-consciousness, of being mired in the decadent languages of contemporary culture. His starting point is not the struggle of the self to express something authentic, but rather the attempt to analyse and deconstruct our corrupt codes in order to ironise them and therefore to reveal them more clearly for what they are. The problem now is not just of what to paint but of the very validity of the painting medium in the light of the invention of means of mechanical reproduction and of the recognition that there is no privileged place for art outside relationships of power.

For Winstanley, painting as painting has lost its potency and can only be pursued in the form of a negation. Its function is to elucidate its end as a viable medium. The problem of subject-matter is bracketed as he takes photographic and video imagery and renders them meticulously as large-scale, out-of-focus paintings. His images are ready-made, although not to the same degree as Gerhard Richter's, with whom inevitable comparison can be made. Whereas Richter's photo-paintings were initially taken at random from pre-existing sources and then later presented as ironic commentaries on the German Romantic tradition, Winstanley's derive from his own choice of images made using photography and video. It is difficult to tell what conditions the choice of imagery - in this exhibition we have views of communal private dining rooms, a landscape and road seen from an automobile - although sheer banality is obviously a major factor. Perhaps they have something to say about art as a mode of consumption, a commodity. But they lack the resonances of Richter's paintings, and the pathos. Indeed, they seem almost like academic versions of the genre, beautifully painted but redundant. Ultimately, the deconstructive edge of this kind of self-immolation in painting now seems blunted by the obvious fact of painting's continued possibilities.

More or less the same age as Winstanley. Jane Harris (born 1956) shows a very different relationship to her



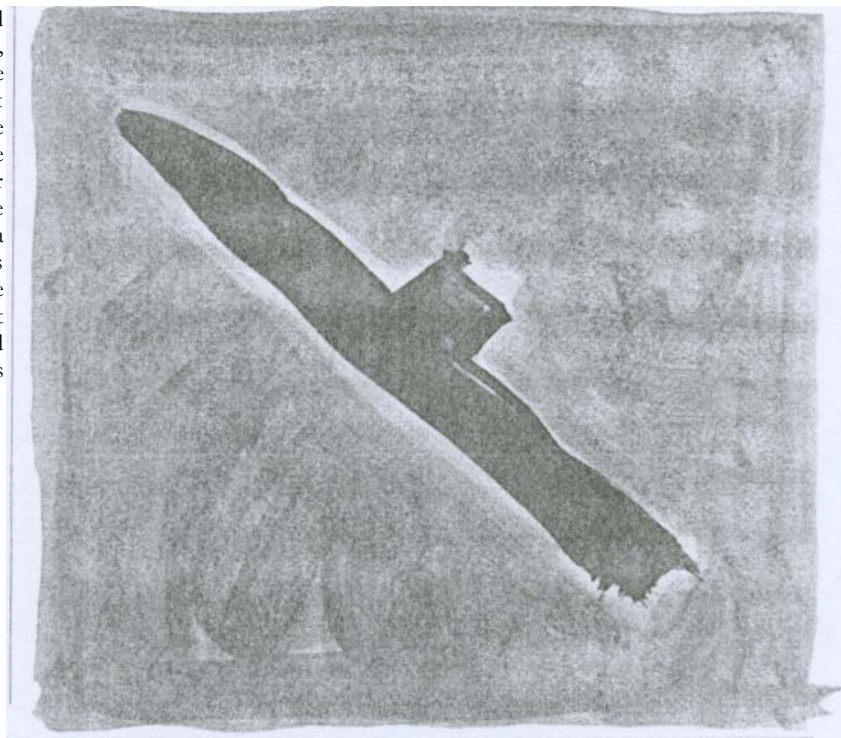
Paul Winstanley
Interior 1993
Interior 1994

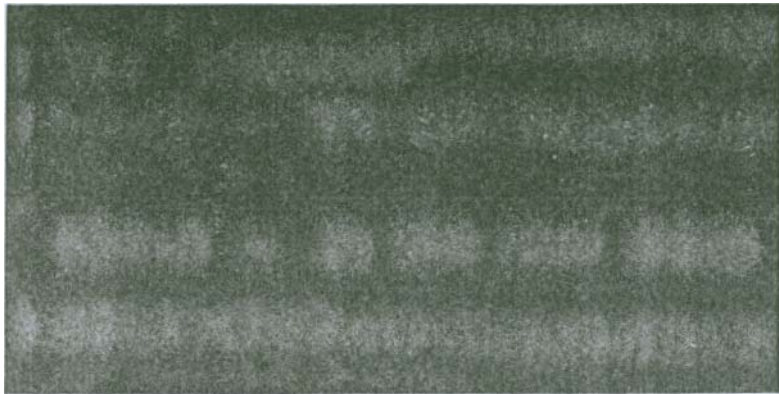
chosen medium. The anxiety over meaning and value, and the very validity of the medium itself, so evident in Winstanley's work, has been more thoroughly assimilated by Harris. She seems to be emerging on the other side of the crisis of subject-matter and medium. Whereas Kinley can be seen as coming before the full crisis and Winstanley as embodying it, Harris loo: , : >!ice is making paintings which dare to mean something both physically and metaphysically.

If we survey the modern period it can be said that one of the first reactions to the crisis we have been discussing was to assert the purely plastic nature of painting - to emphasize its morphological, physical, objectlike qualities. Subject-matter was subsumed under questions of technical structure. Once this had degenerated into mere decoration, the next solution was to reintroduce ready-made imagery as an ironic trope in order to foreground the fundamental problem once more. More recently some artists have simply repudiated the intellectual basis upon which this problem has rested and have gone on making figurative paintings (Lucian Freud for example).

However, the most interesting painting of this moment is located in the tradition of abstract painting which still has the potential for continued strong meanings; a symbolic or metaphoric dimension has tentatively returned to abstract painting but in a way which holds in check the tendency towards the adoption of any obvious

Peter Kinley *Study for submarine 1985*





Jane Harris
Coming on Big 1994

ideology or ready-made belief system. So Jane Harris uses an ellipse as her basic image, a shape that may well bring to mind the mandorlas of Christian art and which, if it does, will immediately set in motion a series of associations with metaphysical implications although, obviously, these are not merely *Christian* paintings. And even if the connection with the mandorla is not made, the shape certainly implies something symbolic. At the same time, however, Harris' paintings function fully on a purely physical level: very subtle variations in brush stroke and areas of matt and gloss finish become evident as one moves around the works and bring them to life on a directly phenomenological level. They therefore have both a clearly defined plastic existence and a more allusive symbolical one. The delicacy of touch and muted tonal range contribute to a sense that these are intended as contemplative works which are meant to offer some kind of embodiment of relief or release from the confusion and anxiety of life.

Ultimately the subject-matter of Harris' paintings is the human need for transcendence and they indicate the special manner in which painting can both point towards such a transcendent space and offer a tentative model of it. Gerhard Richter is worth mentioning in this context as well, for he said in relation to his own abstract paintings: 'Art is the pure realisation of religiosity, of the ability to believe, longing for "God"'. 1

Simon Morley

□ **Michael Platt**

The City Gallery Leicester March 19 to April 23 Arnolfini
 Bristol April 28 to June .5

To describe Michael Platt as a political artist would be to simplify grossly the impact and meaning of his work. Rooted though the artist's work is in the experience of AfroAmerican oppression, he succeeds in underlining basic injustices and anxieties which are universally part of human experience: violent images and narratives from the day to day life of the American underclass are placed alongside photos from Bosnia and pre-liberation South Africa. Through his recurrent themes of childhood and loss of innocence he explores profoundly emotional subjects which provide a multi-layered commentary that transcends mere political discourse and crosses over ethnic boundaries. Platt's apocalyptic prophecies for our society place him in the same tradition as the West African *Griot*, the storyteller/wise man who reinterprets the experience of the individual as part of a shared consciousness.

Platt draws material from newspaper and television

reports, as well as from personal anecdotes. Many of these images relate to the artist's experience of living in Washington DC, American capital and 'City of Landmarks', but also home to one of the country's most deprived Afro-American communities. Individual images are drawn on to wood and then these components are arranged into compositions. Occasionally the same component is duplicated or reused in different works.

The exhibition is dominated by two large wall-mounted pieces. In *Historical Landmark*, 1993, Platt has assembled a group of life-size drawings of children. To one side of this group is a picture of an abandoned, dilapidated house. This image of the domestic structure on the verge of collapse is a metaphor for the failure of society to protect the individual and the motif of the house recurs in several pieces. The figures of the children bear mute witness to this folly. It is also implied that exposure to this devastation is robbing the children of their innocence. The artist's fear is that a society already in a state of degeneration will be a poor legacy for future generations.

Platt's prophetic qualities are demonstrated by *Police Nightmare LA*, where injustice is shown blossoming into open conflict. Platt places the viewer behind the front line of police so that our view is the same as that of the oppressors or perhaps reflecting the fact that, when it comes to reporting domestic conflicts, the news media's perspective is usually the same as the State's. *Police Nightmare LA* could quite easily have been a response to the Rodney King case and the resulting riots, if not for the fact that it was produced a year earlier. Part of the power of the work is the artist's ability to draw together a diverse range of actual narratives and imbue them with a mythical quality which transcends reportage. This piece

Michael Platt *Targets 1993*

