

# Art

MONTHLY

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## The Last Laugh

Bob Dickinson

## Brecht: Redux

Sarah James

## Gail Pickering

Profile by Sophie J Williamson

## Letter from Sri Lanka

Josephine Breese



now in his 70s, their transience and desired perpetuation perhaps tangle up with his own.

He shot *Red Boxing Gloves / Orange Kitchen Gloves*, 1980, on Polavision, 'an instant movie format that the videocassette made obsolete', Fisher writes. Amid storms of pops and glitches, a hand reaches out in each half of the video diptych, stroking a pair of gloves that stands in for a real human – pugilistic gloves, domestic gloves, a seemingly extreme characterisation of masculine and feminine – just as the film stands in for real-world experience. Yet film can perform time-stretching, time-compressing feats that reality cannot. The work's format mimics that of the pendant pair: an innovation of Dutch 17th-century portrait painting, whose classic form is the husband and wife. Fisher, who is not Tacita Dean, had these films transferred to DVD. Much easier to show that way, he notes, but the acquiescence connotes beyond mere pragmatism. This work is about film, sure, but in terms of loving, letting go and the engaged but philosophical mien that permits as much, it is also about anything else that blooms and fades.

Measure the distance between the taut material fetishism of *Production Footage* and Shana Moulton's loose, roughly edited, greenscreen-powered film in *Restless Leg Mannequin*, 2014, at Gimpel Fils, where a video projection onto the backside of a wall-facing mannequin is ringed, ignominiously, by a haemorrhoid pillow. The precursors of this work in Moulton's 'Restless Leg' video sequence found her alter-ego character Cynthia trying to cure the titular syndrome; here, TV ads for pills swim up amid the outlines of dancing women, promising relief. In the related *Activia Massage*, 2014, the video set into a massage table – accoutred with purple plastic back massagers and neck supports – involves a centre for women's health and the eating of Activia yoghurt, while kd lang's *Constant Craving* plays on a nagging loop.

If the backdrop of these works appears to be the external shaping

and management of women's 'needs' and the endlessly restricted sating of same, they are well counterpointed by Lucy Stein's paintings, which hang around them. Stein, whose painting style has veered aggressively in recent years, operates here in lyric-grotesque mode, mixing plump odalisques and silvery handprints and the word 'bum' (all of these in *Grotbag 9*, 2014, seemingly named for a comedy witch from 1980s children's TV), shit-brown smears and quivery, uneasy abstraction in metallic shades of green – Modernism gone murky and sour. She echoes the decorous and feminine in order, it appears, to stomp on it: a big, complicated energy pulses out of the paintings, barely channelled.

How female selfhood finds an outlet – how it is organised, understood, released – is the evident overlap between the artists' works, and naturally surges to the fore in the collaborative video *Polverton*, 2013, no doubt shot on a little handheld camera whose convenience the pair probably didn't think twice about, because that's progress and cameras are just tools. The sketchy plot involves the artists' yearly pilgrimage to the eponymous modernist building in Cornwall (now a care home) to try to work out where and why its architect, Stein's grandfather, committed suicide by jumping into the sea. But as Stein and Moulton gambol by the waters, imitate Barbara Hepworth's pierced sculptures and throw eggs in a gorge as if to fertilise the landscape, it seems more clearly, though still speculatively, to be about a gender-specific tug towards a polyvalent sea: the draw of the tides, lunar cycles, the menstrual cycle. The show's appellation, 'Retention', refers to water retention during the latter but also, implicitly, to other things, including imposed models of the self and the pull of the past, around which we circle without full cognisance or acceptance of inexorable processes. What we want to hold on to, we sometimes cannot; ditto what we might wish to leave behind. This is where we came in. ■

MARTIN HERBERT is a writer and critic based in Berlin.

## Manchester Round-up

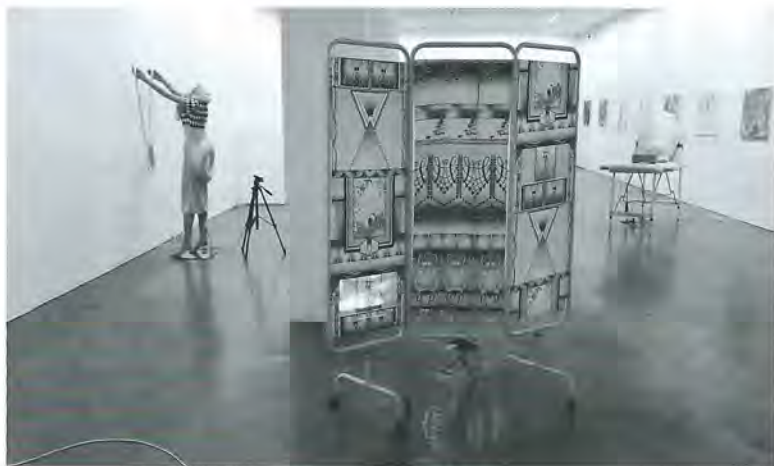
Cornerhouse • Castlefield Gallery • International 3 • Bureau

Visitors to Manchester and Salford frequently comment on the amount of new architecture springing up in the conurbation, much of it in the form of faceless offices, apartments and hotel complexes. One exception is the new arts centre, HOME, due to open in May, replacing Cornerhouse, which is currently celebrating its passing with **Playtime: The Final Show**. Taking its title and cue from Jacques Tati's 1967 film, it promises humour and puzzlement, as you notice Tati's own filmic description, 'the star is the décor', displayed on the wall where visitors enter the gallery. Certainly Gabriel Lester's newly commissioned *Bouncer*, 2014, induces laughter as you pass through a succession of face-high swing doors, following a pathway that wends into Gallery 1 and out again to the accompaniment of the clattering noise made by the same doors closing behind you. Meanwhile, Lester's *Melancholia in Arcadia*, 2011/2014, a lace curtain seemingly frozen at the very moment the breeze is blowing it into life, adorns the window outside.

In Gallery 2, Niklas Goldbach's *Habitat C3B*, 2008, filmed in the 1970s modernist-concrete setting of the Front de Seine district of Paris, presents a complex and crazy chase, with one young male being pursued by changing numbers of identically clothed lookalikes. Its soundtrack of percussive footfalls is oddly musical while the spaces explored by the running men seem dreamily restful. Another space that sets out to alter the mind as well as the eye is Andy Graydon's *Untitled (plate tectonics)*, 2009, which combines vinyl records of sound recordings from

Morgan Fisher  
*Production Footage*  
1971 film

Shana Moulton and  
Lucy Stein  
'Retention'  
installation view





international art institutions, including New York's New Museum and Berlin's PROGRAM, which the visitor can play on turntables. The sound emerges via speakers mounted on materials (including wood and canvas) sourced from the same institutions and suspended from the ceiling, providing a certain amount of audio-separation and perhaps allowing you to hear something of the buildings themselves. It is pleasing to play several records at once, and walk around the gallery experiencing the mixed-up ambience.

Probably the happiest area, though, is upstairs in Gallery 3, where Naomi Kashiwagi's *Swingtime*, 2014, persuades visitors to sit on one of two children's swings and propel themselves up and away. The action triggers sensors that play outdoor recordings (birdsong, foliage rustling) and an older visitor may perhaps be reminded of childhood – although, quite rightly, the installation was permanently occupied by children on the opening night. Nearby, *Molecular Hypnotics*, 2014, by Jan St Werner, provides a chance to recover. The artist is one half of the electronic duo Mouse on Mars, and this environmental installation invites visitors to sit comfortably while listening to a specially composed soundtrack featuring the sardonic voice of the Fall's Mark E Smith mumbling distortedly on various subjects including meditation. It is not exactly enlightening but it does relax the mood before setting off in the direction of Castlefield Gallery.

Not far from HOME's new location, Castlefield Gallery is celebrating its 30th anniversary with the show **30 Years of the Future**, representing the work of a group of promising new artists nominated by selected specialists who have contributed to the gallery's history, including Dave Beech, Pavel Büchler, JJ Charlesworth, Ryan Gander, Mary Griffiths, Pil & Galia Kollektiv, Francis McKee, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Bob & Roberta Smith. On the ground floor, Thomas Yeomans's single-channel video projection, *A Common Future*, 2014, creates a spectacular impression. Yeomans is interested in the sort of positive, 'empowering' imagery beloved by the advertising industry: aerial landscapes, boiling seas and beautiful people confidently going forward in open-topped cars are all grist to his mill. Your eye is delighted while your brain is made suspicious by the richness of it all, as well as by lettering spelling out the word SOON over the shot of a sculpture of a man pole-vaulting. A great leap forward in universal understanding or motivational propaganda – the work could indicate either. Or both.

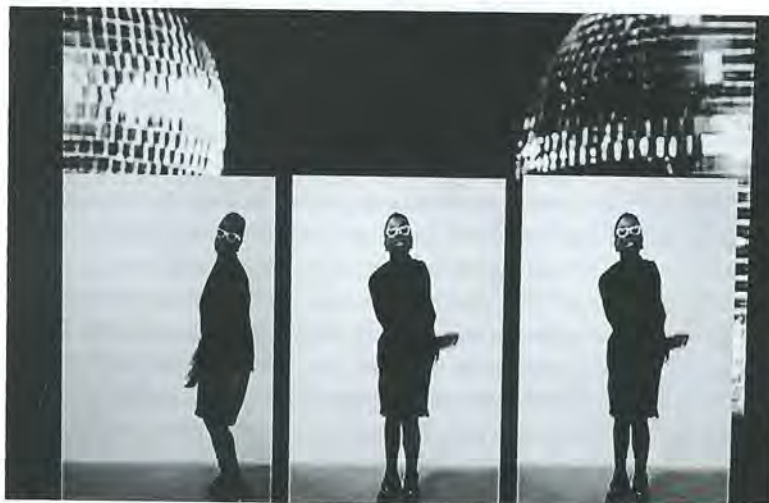
It is less clear whether there exists a connection between *Thanks For the Stuff. Please Take a Poster*, 2014, by the artists known as The Pizza (Hannah Clayden, Rosalie Schweiker, Mario D'Agostino and Jo Waterhouse), an assemblage which includes a pizza stone, paddle and cutter, and Sam Keogh's *Mnemonic Devices*, 2014 – a couple of slightly too realistic sculptures representing pools of vomit – which many visitors made a fuss about sidestepping on their way downstairs.

Once down there, it is easy to get drawn into Samuel Fouracre's *D.M.S.R.*, 2014, a film telling the tale of a woman who has an affair with a 'cracktor' – an actor addicted to crack cocaine – a balding man with made-up eyes, shirt undone and tie askew, who disco-dances like a demon. Cars, skyscrapers and booming dance music lead to the final scene in which he bids her farewell from a phone-box. Nearby, more disco: Evan Ifekoya's *Disco Breakdown*, 2014, describes the making of a DIY dance floor mirror-ball, while another video piece, Jay Delves's *Improvisation for a Sports Club*, 2014, invents the ultimate pointless tackling game in which players end up piling on top of each other, following which the team go to a bar where one of them pours pints of water into his mouth and all over himself. One witty, small-scale installation explores big themes: in a reference to Plato's *Republic*, Nye Thompson's *Cave Cave*, 2014, examines the way technology is becoming 'sentient' by using light to create pictorial shadows on the wall thrown by tiny techno-sculptural components.



Niklas Goldbach  
*Habitat C3B* 2008  
video

Evan Ifekoya  
*The Gender Song* 2014  
video



In Salford's rapidly changing Chapel Street district, International 3 is showing *Gretta's Gabriel, Gabriel's Gretta* – the title of Maeve Rendle's two-screen installation inspired by James Joyce's short story of 1914, *The Dead*. The screens are mounted on plinths of different heights, facing away from each other, each showing film of a man wearing headphones with his back to the camera. Two soundtracks, out of sync with each other, feature the results of a recording of the tenor Michael Jones, who was asked to learn the old Irish ballad *The Lass of Aughrim*, first whistling the tune then singing wordlessly. In Joyce's story, it is the sound of this song that sets Gretta Conroy off into a mournful mood, baffling and frustrating her husband Gabriel after she tells him what the song means to her. Most of the singing is aimed at the rear corner of the space, where it echoes, while the whistling is directed the other way, into emptier air. Emotional distance and lack of connection are the themes of the fiction, echoed and re-examined in this haunting artwork.

Three Hardman Square is a multi-storey office building in Manchester's new, upmarket Spinningfields shopping district. In the building's vast foyer, Bureau has its latest space, currently featuring a specially built wall that exhibits **Mary Griffiths's** *Still Further*, a collection of black drawings. Griffiths uses wood, gesso, gilding size, graphite and shellac varnish, into which she scratches and scrapes thousands of tiny intricate lines. This process creates complex patterns only visible from certain angles and distances, revealing, as one's viewpoint moves, reflected glare and luminosity from the surface of the work. Much of what is seen has personal origins: *Microlight*, 2014, for instance, reused an old table-top given to the artist by an ex-colleague from work who escaped from the restrictions of the job by taking up flying. But, as you stand and contemplate them, these relatively small artworks contain rich visual rewards, surprising to find in such a corporate setting. ■

BOB DICKINSON is a writer and broadcaster based in Manchester.