

the '3' mirrored is 'E'). Some works here even echo works that aren't present: Matthew Deleget's *Pink Nightmare*, 2008 – a panel smashed to leave a ragged-edged frame – looks like Keith Coventry's *Looted Shop Front*, 1997, and Delire's *Counter* recalls rather too closely Floyer's installation at London's Showroom in 1995, in which an infrared beam recorded the number of gallery visitors. I could go on – there is clearly a burden of influence here. But there is also a more pressing issue with 'Presque Rien II' – one shared by all group exhibitions – which is the tendency to iron out differences according to formal similitude.

Thankfully, some works here actively undercut this normative impulse. Christie's own brightly coloured, wall-mounted scaffolding units, such as the small red icon, *Cross*, 2006, are politically loaded critiques of colour – here the George Cross becomes a grid of blood against the white background of England's racial majority. Clay Ketter's mesmerising photograph, *Buena Vista Neighbors*, 2007, from his series 'Gulf Coast Slabs', depicts the skeletal foundations of a house decimated by Hurricane Katrina, underscoring the abject failure of US authorities to prevent or ameliorate tragedy. With such politically conscious artists rubbing shoulders against the likes of Turk and Floyer it rapidly becomes clear the rubric of the 'small gesture' is a somewhat clumsy thesis, especially when applied too seriously. Art historian Julian Stallabrass once confusingly categorised a great swathe of 90s British art as a cynical, marketable exercise in 'one-liners'. This exhibition demonstrates that he was rash in dismissing the format – indeed some of history's greatest epithets, from Aristophanes ('under every stone lurks a politician') to Lenny Bruce ('life is a four-letter word'), are subversive one-liners. I left this show with the overwhelming sense that art's fashions are both too easily forgotten and, paradoxically, too often overrated at the expense of a work's individual forcefulness. 'Presque Rien' is an apt title for a collection that meets us like a succession of quick ripostes – one-liners in the best sense of the word. ■

COLIN PERRY is a critic and writer.

## ■ Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller: The House of Books Has No Windows Modern Art Oxford October 15 to January 18

Franz Kafka, in his book *Amerika*, published in 1927, describes with startling precision the hypnotic effect of technology and mass culture. Karl, the hero of the story, having just arrived in New York, gazes over the balcony of an apartment block at the teeming sights, smells and sounds of the city. He describes the 'enveloping light ... with an effect as palpable to the dazzled eye as if a glass roof stretched over the street were being violently smashed at every moment'. This image is still relevant today and it is within this context that we might understand Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller's fragmented narratives. The impetus of storytelling drives their collaborative, multi-sensory installations at Modern Art Oxford, where the exhibition is sensitively laid out so that each space enhances the impact and flow of this series of memory theatres.

The sound of Janet Cardiff's voice is compelling and memorable because of its intimacy, like the reading voice of a friend, lover or mother, and the artists are known for

narrated walks using Walkman technology. Fragments of narrative, instructions, collaged sounds from movies, sometimes pleasurable combinations and sometimes anxious, create a form of storytelling that is like lucid dreaming. When integrated here with sculptural objects and spaces the effect – as various media correspond – triggers an intensification of the total sensuous experience.

In the installation *The Dark Pool*, 1995, the storytelling is most tangible. A separate room with one doorway, like a studio where aesthetic experiments are conducted, it is full of clutter and reflects the apparent sensibility of a collector. Closer inspection of tabletop debris, dramatically lit by bulbs dangling from the ceiling, reveals that some objects are grouped as vignettes, like a half-finished snack. Some objects function as Surrealist object poems, such as a bird's wing wired to brass plates where we are instructed to insert a photograph into this 'Wish Machine' prototype. Elsewhere found objects generate a sense of déjà vu. Like Adorno's 'Valery Proust Museum', objects dislocated from their original context combine with a babel of sound fragments to provoke involuntary memory. The audience meanders through this work, at times sitting, reading or lying down, and becomes so much a part of the set that it can be startling when a figure moves – and reveals itself to be real and not sculpture.

Lucid dreaming is a useful simile for the literary mechanisms at play in this memory theatre but it is not quite accurate. The artists describe a notion of the self that disembodies and re-embodies through the conscious experience of editing and reassembly of meaning. The proposition is that, in an electronic era, hyperreality may be discerned, articulated and resisted through the pleasurable freeplay of narrative. Certainly the influence of Marshall McLuhan's notion of electronic media as an extension of our bodies' senses and, more recently, Celia Lury's theory of experimental 'editing' of a shifting conception of self help this idea to connect. But in the installation it is probably the presence and responses of other human beings in this elaborate set that make us conscious of production and artifice.

The idea of a place where storytelling occurs, like a porch or theatre, for example, anchors the narratives. Susan Stewart has written about the construction of narrative through the use of the miniature and the gigantic as metaphors. The miniature implies an 'interiorised space and time' while the gigantic is always public. Many of the installations use combinations of these forms: in *The Dark Pool* the intense longing for miniature space locates the pool as a tiny stage, set in a suitcase that is internally lit, whereas *The House of Books Has No Windows*, 2008, defines the audience as giants with its 3ft-high doorway. Created for this exhibition from a sketchbook of unrealised projects, the latter project has no audio component. Made entirely of stacked books, with mitred corners and corbelled roof, it looks like a child's playhouse. The spines of the books face outwards so that inside they form a variegated relief as different sizes protrude into the space, giving the appearance of a patterned visual code.

As a finale, the theatrical installation *The Killing Machine*, 2007, initially very provocative, is quite different from the other works. The catalogue states that this work is about politics, and specifically about American capital punishment, while incarceration of prisoners without due process at Guantanamo Bay is also implied. The audience must choose to be complicit; there is a push-button to start graceful, raptor-like robots that pantomime the killing of an imaginary body. This interpretation of Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony' is abbreviated to a five-minute experience.

Janet Cardiff &  
George Bures Miller  
*Opera for a Small Room*  
2005  
installation view



As Walter Benjamin has pointed out, making politics beautiful is always problematic, and whether this installation provokes, like Ed Keinholz's early work to which the artists refer, or whether the seductive professionalism of the work merely produces a fetishised shock and awe remains unresolved. ■

STEPHEN LEE is a sculptor.

## ■ Daria Martin

Maureen Paley London October 28 to December 7

Watching Daria Martin's new film, *Harpstrings and Lava*, 2007, made me highly aware of the two simultaneous voices I experience in relation to artworks that address subjectivity. One voice asks me what is going on here and why am I being directed by the work to process it in this way; the other one is pitched at a murmur that probes the work's gestures without judgement. While these strands operate diametrically, they are much more intimately connected than the clichés of binary logic – conscious/unconscious, mind/body, and inner/outer – would have it.

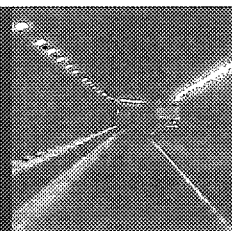
The 13-minute colour film, featuring two women, is structured around a series of binaries: light/dark, order/chaos and sound/muteness. One woman, the composer and musician Zeena Parkins, a long-time collaborator of Martin, plays an improvisational score on an electric harp in a stage set whose architecture and melancholy yellow hues are reminiscent of a de Chirico painting. The camera

establishes her space in a sequence of mid-shots and close-ups of hands, face and instrument before snaking along entwined, elongated branches to arrive at a dark cavernous space, where another woman, the actor Nina Fog, also a long-time collaborator of Martin's, lies sleeping. This space is littered with tinfoil (lava – a few specimens of which are presented in the adjoining gallery along with some sketches of caves); fabric fronds hang from the ceiling. As well as the tree-like umbilical cord, the connection between these spaces is foregrounded by the kinetic tremors Fog's character performs as she awakens to the sound of the highbrow music, her snuffly breathing sounds contrasting to its pure tension. Like a creature in a burrow, she scratches around in her environment for ways of making exterior sounds. A narrative of the emergence of subjectivity as sensory mimesis unfolds. As Fog's character finally stands up in her space to confront Parkins' character, the two realms separated by architectural stage set arches, she stretches her hands out as if to hold an instrument and moves her fingers in time to the music's rhythm. The film's kinaesthetic and synaesthetic senses are intensified by this moment, as well as the one following in which Fog's character (it might be more exact to call her a figure rather than a character) opens her mouth to produce harmonic sounds in sonic answer to the taut piercing notes of the harp. Sound and image coexist to generate a narrative of human becoming through movement and gesture, probing sound and space.

My other voice kept on asking me why is this a film rather than a live theatrical/musical performance? What does a film of a theatrical performance enact that could not be experienced in a live setting? *Harpstrings and Lava* was the second film I had seen in the past week which featured a musician playing an

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