

**B L A C K**

**“The Referential Void”**

GL Brierley, Kieran Brown, Paul Chiappe, Monica Jaeger,  
Michael Lisle-Taylor, Richard Parry, Nessie Stonebridge

3<sup>rd</sup> September - 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2010

Private View: 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2010

The word ‘black’ is a referential void, sucking in all kinds of ideas, images, stances and politics. This show dives into this semantic fluidity and looks at the idea of blackness in all its shades: sensory, aesthetic and cultural. Each artist was asked to select or make a piece of work in response to the word ‘black’ – a simple, open framework devised to encourage artistic digression.

**GL Brierley’s** intricate oils on canvas conjure up the ghosts of Baroque painting. In *Covetelle* (2008), a grotesque figure sitting atop of a pedestal emerges from darkness. A patchwork of painterly textures, this unsettling hybrid is at once male and female, human, animal and algae. It’s as if it had been slowly secreted by a womb-like obscurity – a nightmare captured in oil and offered to our scrutiny. The prey can become predator, though, and *Covetelle*, the trapped specimen, has the appeal of a temptress. Its glaze highlights are applied on the canvas like sultry make-up; a silky cloth is pulled up to reveal enticing accretions of paint. *Covetelle* teases its viewers; it forces them to submit to its monstrosity like one would give into a kink.

**Richard Parry’s** *Air Jordan Plinths* (2010) celebrates Michael Jordan, ‘the greatest basketball player of all time’, with an installation redolent of conceptualists’ strategies. On the floor, short plinths bear black and white photographs of Jordan performing a dunk shot. On the wall hangs the printout of an email exchange between the artist and the gallery: ‘when I step on the *Air Jordan Plinths*’, writes Parry, ‘my height increases from 186 to 198 cm and I’m the same height as Michael Jordan’. For all its visual severity, *Air Jordan Plinths* is a tongue-in-cheek take on the fan attitude; it parodies the frenzy surrounding sporting icons and the dream of ‘becoming him’, Jordan, even if only for a few seconds. This sanctification of the hero is particularly visible in the treatment of the images: downloaded from the Internet, the pictures have been enhanced and converted into black and whites tones, giving to the ephemeral portraits the gravitas of longstanding historical documents.

If you step on one of the *Air Jordan Plinths*, you may find yourself facing **Paul Chiappe’s** drawing *Untitled 42* (2009). The piece is so small that your eyes have to readjust to make sense of the figure. Gradually it falls into focus: the cringing image of a boy in blackface. The kid stands against a non-descript wall, posing as if for a souvenir photograph. Like in most of Chiappe’s drawings, the picture comes from a compilation of found materials. Here the made-up boy is borrowed from a vintage postcard and the background from a Portishead video – its PG logo adding another twist to the piece’s fleeting narrative. Chiappe’s warped memories

probe into the history of political correctness. Dot by dot, the artist revives and reinvents a collective past, and presents it like forensic evidence.

In her charcoal on paper *Hearts and Wings Start their Beating* (2010) **Nessie Stonebridge** staged an original chaos. Swathes of powdery black explode on the sheet; the figure evokes a cosmological vortex suspended in dizzying motion, a big bang of velvety matter about to blurt out the first fragments of a new world. The piece records a very physical encounter between the artist and the support she chose, and the length of her arm determines the shape of the overbearing arc. Stonebridge also allows place for quietness in this graphic fury and pale drawn discs punctuate the large sheet. They function like whole notes in a musical score – fleeting moments of tranquil intensity.

A drawing tool in *Hearts and Wings Start their Beating*, charcoal is in **Kieran Brown's** *No Air, No Care, Carbon Archives* (2008 – ongoing) a sculptural material. Over the last two years, the artist has been collecting wooden souvenirs from charity shops and car boot sales, he then put them in a steel drum filled with sand and fired the lot. The sand stopped the oxygen, which prevented the wooden knick-knacks from burning. Instead, they re-emerged as charcoal. All of these objects encapsulate an idea of 'foreignness'. If some can clearly be associated with a geographical area – the combs and masks with Africa, the clogs with Holland – others, like the freestanding dolphin, are more difficult to place. But their differences are evened out by the stern blackness of their new material. Displayed on crates, as if just brought back by an enlightened amateur, they stand as a uniform 'other' – ready to be consumed.

In a previous life **Michael Lisle-Taylor** was a soldier, and much of his work has drawn on the can-do attitude and the black humour often crucially needed by the servicemen to survive. *Maiden Voyage* (2008) stems from a series of works in which he transported a mini boxing ring – a reduced 'theatre of operations' – to the top of the Brecon Beacons in Wales. Reversing this logic, the artist then set out to travel under the large mountain range and explored an underwater cavern onboard a precarious, coffin-like submersible. Hanging in the gallery from an intricate network of ropes, the expedition's oversized relic brings to mind the enthusiasm of the first submarines' inventors, those intrepid men who explored the Thames at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century inside a submerged bell dragged by a boat. At once ancient-looking and oddly futuristic, it crystallises a take on the world where nothing is impossible.

**Monica Jaeger's** dystopian landscape *All that is Solid* (2010) similarly hovers in-between temporalities. The gigantic tunnel could be the remnant of a civilisation now disappeared, or the fate awaiting our own behemoth urbanism. Jaeger depicts a hostile environment, a dead land where no form of life could survive. The pale shades of grey at the end of the tunnel could however suggest a possibility of renewal: Jaeger's masterful command of ink reinserts subtle nuances in the piece's overall narrative.