

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Harrison, Sara. "Yes! I am a Long Way from Home." *Art Monthly* (March 2004).

■ Yes! I Am A Long Way From Home

The Nunnery London March 8 to April 19

'Yes! I Am A Long Way From Home', but by no means far enough it strikes me as I look out across the water in Gordon Cheung's newspaper collage. A great solid-looking tree stands at the edge of the oasis, offering the reassurance of shelter, its delicate fronds clearly those of the foliage of warm climes. Beyond, land stretches far out into the unknown. The cream and black tones lend it an old fashioned sepia-like quality, as if some unspoilt exotic land, untouched by humankind and time, has been discovered. It is a generic paradise, an idealised landscape, a kind of blueprint to be developed in our imaginations as these cold winter nights bring on the need for escapism.

But many of those whose works are on show here have travelled less far and appear to be not so jaded that they cannot find beauty closer to home. In *Winter Landscape*, 1996-97, Peter Doig dwells on familiar, anonymous urban surroundings – the backs of houses, garden fences, trees

and shrubs. He captures them through the blurry haze of falling snow, just at the moment of their transformation into something unfamiliar, new and beautiful. In *Holy Day*, 2002, George Shaw has painted the bend in a path through two grassy banks. The title and subject matter suggest that it forms part of the series 'Scenes from the Passions', a group of which is currently on show in the Tate Triennial. What would conventionally be dismissed as uninspiring surroundings seem in fact to have inspired a great affection in Shaw, a warmth that is somehow conveyed through his meticulous rendering. The grand and somewhat opaque title – *And these admissions he could never forget. His soul carried them along, cast them aside, then cradled them again in its bosom, like corpses in a river. And they poisoned it*, 2003 – rather overburdens Richard Hogg's view at dusk of a London park. There is an almost childlike simplicity to the work. It has an illustrative quality, in which the defining characteristics of each element of the landscape have been exaggerated – the solid tree trunks sink into a dense carpet of vibrantly green grass, while the leafless branches stretch out above, delicately interlocking against the evening sky. In the middle distance, there



Gordon Cheung
Number Painting:
*Bloodshot Vision of an
Oasis 2002*

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George Shaw
Holy Day 2002

are some quintessentially urban pampas grasses and beyond that we can glimpse Foster's Gherkin.

Whilst aesthetically the distance may be great, there are many firm historical ties in these contemporary takes on landscape. Doig's glimpse of normal-looking houses has a dim and distant precedent in the urban scenes of Vermeer and his contemporaries. The Impressionists were on hand to record the advent of industry, which in turn led to the new found leisure pursuits of city dwellers – a particular and well-recorded favourite being jaunts to the seaside. This is taken up, albeit at a great aesthetic remove, by Jason Brooks, one of the few artists on show here to incorporate a strong human presence into the landscape. In *Camber*, 2003, the view out from the dunes to the sand and sea beyond is obstructed by a peeing urbanite. The fashionably clad girl, whose identity and modesty is preserved as her head is cropped out of the image, is literally caught with her pants down. The fibres of her fake fur jacket, the creases in her denim jeans and the smoothness of her skin are rendered with a photographic precision. But the photographic aesthetic is perhaps even more apparent in the use of perspective and focus. Looming up in the immediate foreground, the grasses are blurred, the eye is drawn on to the sharply focused tip of her garish purple, blue and green cowboy boots and the patch of sand above which she hovers, and then beyond the plants and horizon drift out of focus again.

The seaside theme continues as Dan Hays bridges the gap between depictions of an exoticised far yonder and the visual pleasure found amid more familiar surroundings. In *Dear Lucy*, 1999, he has recreated in oil a

multi-scene postcard of some tourist resort, the vibrant blues of which provide a startling and welcome relief amid this very green exhibition.

In the first room there is a beautifully delicate tempera painting by Andrew Grassie. This sunny view of the great outdoors appears to be a straightforward celebration of its beauty, in which the awe inspiring and humbling vastness of nature is accentuated further by the tiny scale of the work. The colouring is that of an old photograph, an impression confirmed by the title: *After Robert Smithson's photograph of 'Asphalt Rundown' 1969*, 2002. Not an ode then to the unspoilt wilderness, but instead a record of man's disruption of nature, or more significantly an artist's response to and interaction with the landscape. As such it provides a touchstone for this exhibition in its aim to bring together contemporary takes on landscape. Working in a photorealist vein and in this instance from a photograph, Grassie's work points to the cross-media fertilisation apparent within many of these paintings. Furthermore, via its explicit reference to the work of Smithson it underlines the ties these artists retain with traditions of the landscape genre, and highlights the cyclical pattern of borrowing which finds a photographic record of a land artist's work being newly recorded in the endangered medium of tempera. ■

Yes! I Am A Long Way From Home will tour to the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art in Sunderland, May 2 to June 7 and to the Herbert Read Gallery, KIAD, Canterbury from September 30 to October 24.

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