

Manchester



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REVIEWS



Per Kirkeby, untitled, 1995, oil on canvas, ca. 78 1/2 x 51 1/4"



Georgina Starr, Visit to a Small Planet (Being Blue), 1994-95, video installation. From "The British Art Show 4."

COPENHAGEN

PER KIRKEBY
GALLERI SUSANNE
OTTESEN

Provocation by way of beauty might be a fitting way to describe Per Kirkeby's paintings of the '90s. This recent exhibition consisted of 19 tantalizing canvases, each radiating a dark, almost subterranean energy—with gray and purple areas of clay, mud, and gravel; glowing belts of ore and burning lava; and green and bright-blue streams. Kirkeby, a trained geologist, has transformed science into art, to splendid, almost unnerving effect.

One could detect in Kirkeby's previous work a desire to explore the places where nature and culture intersect. Each canvas was a semiotic battlefield—fragments of figures clashing with abstract fields of color, and mechanical and artificial elements confronting organic ones. Some of the paintings were sliced into sections, frustrating the viewer's desire for integration and unity, while other works incorporated fragments lifted from pop culture—including bits of advertisements and pornographic magazines—to produce a multifaceted, at times confusing brew.

In recent years, however, Kirkeby's paintings have become increasingly harmonious, and, one is tempted to say, even ecological in tone and content; these geological landscapes seem very distant from the worlds of media and modern technology. At a time when many European painters seem somewhat unsure about the status of their medium—often working simultaneously in a variety of styles—Kirkeby, the painter, has steadily worked toward a certain coherence and unity of expression. Although he demonstrates his

versatility as an artist by working as a sculptor, filmmaker, and essayist as well as a painter, he is not trying to push the boundaries of his artmaking or to question the validity of painting. On the contrary, his paintings concentrate on nature, a quite traditional subject in Scandinavian art.

It is not at all difficult to see Kirkeby's new work as representative of a long tradition of Nordic landscape painting, with forerunners that include Carl Fredrik Hill and, perhaps even more importantly, August Strindberg, an amateur painter who verged on inventing abstract art. An interesting question, however, is what the desire to depict nature in its pure form can signify today, in a world brimming with technology and digital information. Are these paintings nostalgic images that express a yearning for lost innocence, or are they instead forward-looking expressions of Heideggerian hope? The canvases may radiate a warm and reassuring glow, but they give no answer.

This does not, however, mean that they are mere metaphysical wallpaper—rather that these incredibly beautiful, large-scale oil paintings are executed with a skill hardly any other European painter seems capable of today. In the current artistic climate, beauty comes as a shock.

—Daniel Birnbaum

MANCHESTER

"THE BRITISH ART
SHOW 4"

"The British Art Show," which takes place every five years, is a major survey of recent developments in British art—it's a bit like the Whitney Biennial, only fewer artists are included, and the show tours

around Britain. The new edition has been billed as the most ambitious to date, and this is certainly true if one considers the number of sites and the amount of space allotted to each of the 26 artists. The city of Manchester is hosting the event for the first time, and has provided seven different venues; these range from the City Art Galleries, famous for steamy pre-Raphaelite works, to a converted covered market.

Manchester's involvement is symptomatic of an ever-increasing thirst for contemporary art in Britain, which can be credited mainly to the success of the Tate Gallery's outpost in Liverpool—though one shouldn't discount the Damien Hirst effect. Not surprisingly, Hirst is the focal point of the show, but his Grand Guignol manner looks a little out of place here. While his formally elegant vitrines housing an array of distressed office furniture and animal carcasses may share in the '80s obsession with "humanizing" Minimalism, many of his generation are more inclined toward gestures that are at once homemade, idiosyncratically emotional, and on a disarmingly small scale.

Perhaps one should steer clear of the nine artists whose work also appeared in "Brilliant!" in Minneapolis, and instead single out a few interesting newcomers. The young Scottish sculptor Kerry Stewart has come to the fore over the last year—her mannequinlike sculptures often feature children as protagonists. Here Stewart's best piece is *Poldark*, 1995, named after the male star of a costume drama that she watched as a child. In this work two painted fiberglass girls kneel beside a statuesque figure that is cut off at the hips. This half-figure appears to be made from a brown, grungy substance, which the girls gouge at with their fingers—startling in its extreme greed, it

seems a post-Freudian version of those religious statues whose extremities have been eroded from being constantly touched by pilgrims.

Catherine Yass has also come into her own this year, with her unsettling light-box photographs that function as institutional critiques. She recently undertook a major project in Springfield Hospital, a London psychiatric institution that was scheduled to close, and eight compact images of Springfield's corridors, emptied of patients and staff, were scattered throughout the show in Manchester. Through her darkroom process, Yass transforms these dismal, abandoned passages into shimmering mirages of saturated color. The effect she achieves—a dense green and blue fog—may render the light constructions of Dan Flavin and James Turrell, but unlike these artists Yass does not aim for a dematerialization of architecture. On the contrary, she manipulates light in order to render spaces more vivid—light fixtures, dustbins, phone kiosks, and door panels throb like beacons piercing the fog. In the piece Yass showed at the City Art Galleries, the glowing colors had an almost pre-Raphaelite intensity, turning an anonymous interior into a smoldering, cathedral-like space.

The curators of "The British Art Show 4" have gone for video in a big way, but with the exception of Gillian Wearing's bitersweet confessionals and Mat Collishaw's *Snowstorm*, 1994, in which a homeless person sleeps inside a kitschy snow-globe, the video component is disappointing. The laconic Ceal Floyer, who shows a one-minute videotape of fingers tapping at the edge of a big black table, is the best newcomer. She also projects an image of a light switch onto a wall, as well as four other images of a glowing lightbulb onto an extinguished bulb suspended from the ceiling—art for the inmates of a drably institutional Plato's cave.

—James Hall

CORRECTIONS

The works depicted on page 58 of "Where Are We Going? What Are We Doing? Rirkrit Tiravanija's Art of Living" (February 1996) should have been captioned counterclockwise from the top left. Also, Jack Pierson's *All of a Sudden* ("Real Life Rock," February 1996) is published by powerHouse Books/Thea Westrich.

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—[James Hall](#)