

Dan Smith.

**Review: 'John Russell, The Trade Apartment'.
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John Russell
Purple 2002

■ John Russell

The Trade Apartment London May 25 to June 29

During the 90s John Russell worked as part of BANK, the group he co-founded and left ten years later; since his split from BANK he has worked on collaborations with Fabienne Audéoud. Despite his activities generating a substantial amount of interest over the past few years, 'The Collagist' is his first solo show. It is difficult to tell whether or not the images on display here (all works 2002) have been staged as some form of savage attack. It is an understandable first impression particularly since the presence of familiar artworks, which have been irreverently and crudely incorporated into some of the images, provokes an unsettling and self-conscious tone. However, this work seems to have been deliberately configured to remain elusive so that any hope of finding a concrete position by which to read these images is lost upon close inspection.

All of the works in the show have been produced as Hexachrome prints mounted onto shallow boxes and laminated with a thick gel which provides a glossy surface. These are not dye-based prints but are made up of vibrant pigment colours which will apparently last for 200 years. This longevity suggests that the prints have been made as if to insert into a recognised tradition, in a conscious effort to emphasise an intended engagement with art history and aesthetics.

Set against walls that have been painted blue/turquoise, perhaps evocative of a salon, the work constitutes a loose series unified in medium and format though chaotically varied in terms of imagery. Each is a form of shoddy Photoshop collage which has been beautifully produced as an object, and each has some form of frame incorporated into the picture plane. In *Purple/Red*, the silhouette of one of Yinka Shonibare's alien figures, rendered as a psychedelic pattern, stands

in an indeterminate, vaguely illusionistic space, surrounded by a frame made up of the colours in the title. This space has been formed out of blocks of colour, which in turn have been laid over an obscured pixelated photograph, just visible through gaps where the blocks of colour fail to meet. In Russell's strategy, these gaps are as much sites of potential signification as the choice of iconography. The alien itself looks as if it might be lost and vulnerable. It looks ridiculous but it is nevertheless granted the illusion of agency and dramatised in a new scenario. Alongside it, *Cyan/Magenta* is a relatively banal photograph of a bus stop framed in the same way. Next is an image plundered from history of a guillotine violently interrupted by the image of a cockroach-infested head snatched from a horror film. Elsewhere, images of ornate moulded frames have been appropriated to be incorporated as the borders of some of the prints. Set within a golden frame, *Purple* depicts the inexplicable transplant of the head of a ridiculous-looking bird onto the body of 70s rock icon Peter Frampton.

Although the overall degree of variation and diversity seems to negate any immediate possibility of coherence, the images are unified by the obsessive manner in which Russell seeks to expose their crude artifice. The candour of his gestures is exaggerated, alluding as they do in part to a broad field of uses and contexts for the circulation of digital images. The status of each picture is ambivalent, glossy and slick like advertising, yet cobbled together like a visual joke emailed around an office. In *Orange/Green*, for instance, Jeff Wall's *Diatrobe*, 1985, has been updated and Jake and Dinos Chapman sculpture has been added to the scene, itself modified so that it now weeps blood, while the head of one of the figures in the photograph has been obscured with the face of a snarling fashion model. Yet although ridiculous, the new face pasted onto Wall's photograph implies a reflexive scrutiny, albeit one that may simultaneously parody the complex theories of viewer/image relationships that Wall theorises so earnestly.