



## On seas of unreality

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### John Russell's vast, startling computer images challenge the very way we look at art, says Richard Dorment

The last time I wrote about a work by British artist John Russell, this newspaper - quite rightly - refused to print the review. It happened about 10 years ago, when Russell was a member of an art collective called BANK, who made some of the funniest, most outrageous, politically incorrect, and visually electrifying art of the 1990s.



Otherworldly: the figures in John Russell's billboard-size tableaux have no true equivalent in nature

As I recall, I described in some detail a sculptural installation involving the crucifixion of four hyper-realistic, life-size figures. The blood-soaked spectacle was so horrifying that no mainstream publication in Europe could have published a photograph of it. Did I mention that the figures were naked, and that they were female?

I did not know Russell by name then, but, now that BANK has split up, he is back, working as a solo artist and having his first London show at Matt's Gallery. The exhibition is called *Ocean Pose*, and it consists of four highly illusionistic tableaux digitally printed on vinyl, each the size of a billboard and each lit from behind.

When you first walk into the darkened space in which they are being shown, the visual impact almost knocks you off your feet because you find yourself surrounded by luridly coloured, apparently life-size figures that seem to rise up out of the ocean, or else to walk on water, flinging their arms wide and throwing their heads back as if in the throes of ecstasy. Silhouetted against Technicolor horizons at dawn, at sunset and at night, some are naked, while others wear body stockings or ordinary clothes.

There are also wide-eyed infants, a pussycat, a woman in a wheelchair, a sports car and an armoured tank - an inventory of things to love, to pity, to desire, and to fear.

In the only scene in which no humans appear, a pitiful mauve-tinted unicorn is caught in the tentacles of a giant red squid, like a creature emblazoned on some heraldic device. This is classic surrealist imagery, and the unwary viewer might be tempted to approach it rationally, like a Freudian analyst interpreting a dream.

But I don't think Russell wants these works to be interpreted. Look a little longer and you see that many of these creatures are not fully human: they could be automatons, or perhaps figures lifted out of computer games.

A few of the apparently male figures have female genitals, while fingers protrude from the chest of one mutant hermaphrodite, who cries out as it lifts its hands up as though in supplication to the starry night sky.

Clearly, we are in territory familiar to us from the work of Salvador Dalí, the Chapman brothers, Matthew Barney and even Antony Gormley, a realm of art and fantasy where anything goes. The scale and dramatic power of the tableaux also recall the recent work of Jeff Koons and looks back to Géricault's Raft of the Medusa and David's Rape of the Sabine Women.

Because the works are digitally printed from images either found or created on a computer, nothing looks real. Figures, landscapes, colours: none has any real equivalent in nature, but all can be found in films such as Miami Vice or Sin City. And, if the people look unreal, so do the emotions they mime. Their joy is manufactured, a parody of the kind of thing you see in TV adverts and the pages of glossy magazines.

Russell has created a creepy, texture-less, depth-less world using readily available computer programs such as Vue, Poser and Bryce. He collages figures he finds on the internet into his landscapes using Photoshop.

Perhaps surprisingly, it is here, in his working methods, that the real meaning of Ocean Pose may lie. For the works are really about the nature of visual experience. From a distance, we read swirls of psychedelic colour as ripples in the sea, or as the reflection of a yellow sports car on a purple stretch of water, but step up close and such illusions disintegrate into areas of pure abstraction.

That is because digital images are flat. They remain on the surface of the vinyl, so that if you step up close it is impossible to distinguish between near and far, as you easily do in a painting or a photograph. (You can't see this in a reproduction, only in real life). Russell, I think, is dealing with a problem that has preoccupied artists since Manet, the struggle to create pictorial illusion while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the picture plane.

He solves the problem using a computer, a tool not available to Cézanne, Picasso or Pollock. So, in a sense, Russell's lurid subject matter is the McGuffin that distracts us from his real subject.

While we are busy figuring out what all this loony imagery means, Russell has been wrestling with a dilemma that would have fascinated a formalist art critic such as Clement Greenberg. If he gives us livid colours and unforgettable images to look at, it is because he knows that the enemy of good art is boredom. Russell makes us look and look until finally we see.

- 'Ocean Pose' is at Matt's Gallery, Copperfield Road, London E3 (0208 9831771), until June 3. 'The Daily Telegraph' is a media sponsor of Matt's Gallery.

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