

JOHN RUSSELL: OCEAN POSE



Sally O'Reilly, Review: 'Ocean Pose,'

ART REVIEW, JUNE 2007

John Russell's *Ocean Pose* is a hyperventilating treatise on representation, breaking all the modernist taboos: it is steamy with illusory space, narrative, theatricality and decorative patterning. Huge 35-foot-long vinyl canvases, backlit with a slow-fission-like glow and printed with digitally rendered panoramas, line the gallery floor-to-ceiling on all four sides. Each image is bisected by a clear horizon, from which an expanse of ocean extends towards us as a stage for tableaux of plausible, possible and improbable figures. There is a classical model that outlines the relationship between the real and the imaginary whereby all that is real is imaginable but not all that is imaginable is real, so that the possible passes through an editing process to become real. This transcendental model implies that

there is some sort of storehouse full of possibilities waiting for promotion to reality, and there is something of this about Russell's tableaux – they are like rehearsals of rejected improbables.

While the size of the work speaks of advertising hoardings, the imagery hollers a boy's wet dream: a tank and sporty car, naked men and women, a unicorn and giant octopuses. All the human figures – from a woman with a goitred neck and camel-foot jeans to a toddling baby with no genitals to a nice young man in a wheelchair – have their arms raised in some sort of gesture, perhaps epiphanic, erotic, martyred or disco cool. Toggling between the dystopic and the celebratory, Russell is pushing buttons of desire and disgust, but not in a dull, binary 'uncanny' way; there is a more anthropological entanglement of mythology, science fiction and technological prescience here. Although there is usually a handspan of feasibility that separates fantasy and acquisitiveness, here they are curiously intractable. It is as though the levels that constitute the average human's drive have been knocked by some clumsy elbow and thrown into ghastly disarray.

Regarding art history as malleable and miscible as imagery, Russell percolates classical, surrealist and mainstream pictorial cues through the same digital 'stuff'. And he would appear to appropriate and collage art's ethical impetuses (the laudatory, parodic, mimetic and grotesque) with as much alacrity, while in the show's accompanying booklet he skids through a slew of theoretical mud, spraying up abstract perturbations, glimpses of fiction and aesthetic insinuations, never quite settling on a comforting register of discourse. Russell's overriding methodology, its sticking point and its pivot, seems to be: if a way of picturing can be pictured or imagining imagined or theorising theorised... chuck it in. *Sally O'Reilly*