

# Profile

## ■ Paper Moon

Gilda Williams on David Thorpe

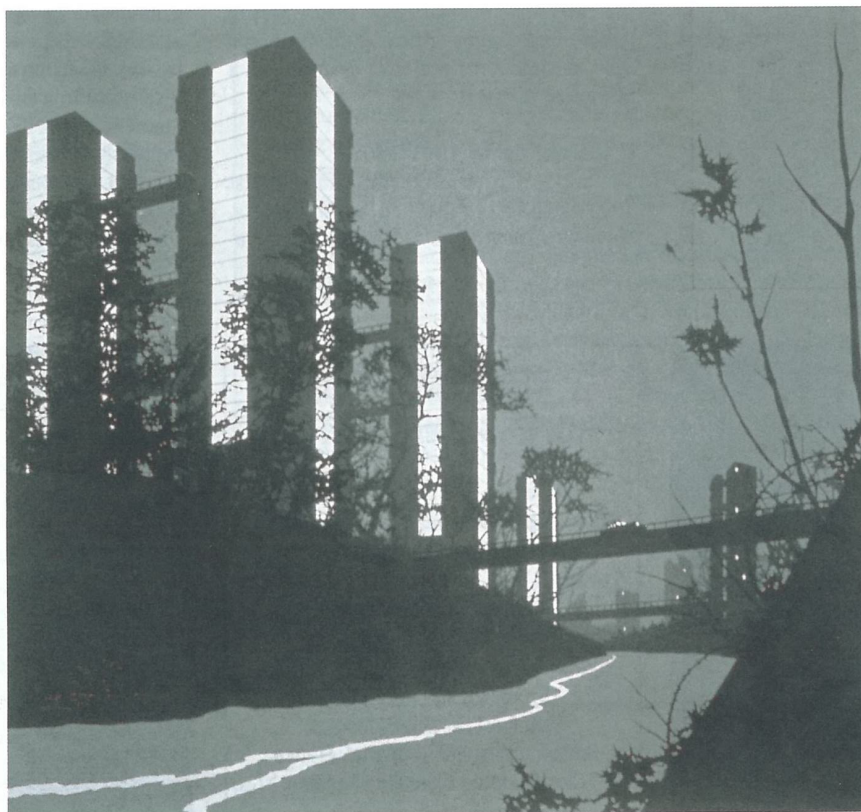
Once the revolution is completed, what kind of homes shall we live in? Where, for example, would a 21st-century Jean-Jacques Rousseau set up house? Probably a trailer park in the American West, in an all-mod-cons caravan perched high in the peaks of an Albert Bierstadt painting, fulfilling the new social contract in a rent-free vacation home. Rousseau would live in a David Thorpe collage, nestled inside a paper landscape called *We Are Majestic in the Wilderness*, 1999.

Thorpe's soaring views of nature and post-*Blade Runner* cityscapes make you ask, what if the utopias of the Enlightenment and of Modernism had worked? What if the happy, revolutionary schemes devised by early 20th-century architects had borne fruit? One is reminded of Le Corbusier's drawings of his visionary *Ville Radieuse*, weirdly seductive even today. Clean, crimeless high-rises fade into an endless urban one-point perspective, the earth below carpeted with lush vegetation and empty tennis courts, the air filled with noiseless aeroplanes and huge, healthy white clouds. Ultimately, Le Corbusier was a Romantic like Rousseau, dreaming of real freedom and democracy in uniform residential units towering above a Bois du Boulogne-like jungle that would replace the old, unhealthy city streets. As Le Corbusier envisioned it, the architecture itself would solve most social ills. Domestic upkeep would be minimal in his airy interiors, and leisure time would abound in dustless, temperature-controlled villas in the sky. Who are the serene, poised, desireless men and women lounging about in Le Corbusier's drawings if not early 20th-century versions of the Rousseauian

noble savage, enlightened and emancipated beings free of want, timelessly living the simple, good life?<sup>1</sup>

David Thorpe is a kind of Romantic too, with his paper cut-outs of vast gleaming cities and parklands inhabited by tiny, contented figures, in the big world/small people tradition of Caspar David Friedrich and Frederick Church. But Thorpe's figures are hardly transcendental, 18th-century explorers overwhelmed by the awesome spectacle of nature. These are more like Le Corbusier's contemporary noble savages, well-fed city dwellers, merrily gathering on an empty bridge to wave at a helicopter (*Live for Kicks*, 1997), or riding an eco-friendly cable car to gaze at a perfect moon (*Midnight Rendezvous*, 1997). These are the uncomplicated people whom Rousseau theorised would have lived before the Fall; Thorpe's figures indeed have never fallen, having paraglided elegantly to earth in monogamous teams of two (*Out from the Night, the Day Is Beautiful and We Are Filled with Joy*, 1999). Once safely landed, small groups of these underscaled, ageless innocents join together at such events as a summer roof party (*Watching Rockets*, 1997). They are uncomplaining, modern revellers, absorbed in the here and now of the moment, admiring together the constellations and comets in the clear heavens above. One can almost hear the quiet strains of Beck or the Beach Boys' *Endless Summer* piped into the automatic, indoor/outdoor sound system concealed beneath the patio tiles; the refrigerator purring and dispensing nutritious, non-addictive ambrosia – but no more than is actually consumed. This is a world without waste, without clutter, without sound save for the occasional flutter of a handglider in the big cold sky, or the windless spinning of a monumental ferris wheel (*Fun*, 1997) – effortlessly erected, no doubt, to commemorate the lasting achievements of the revolution.

Such is the dream-like atmosphere of David Thorpe's collages, with their ability to conjure scenarios and fictions of a much-evolved parallel universe. Perhaps the



David Thorpe  
*Forever* 1998





most corny Romantic scene of all, however, is that depicted by the artist at work. Surrounded by scraps of overpriced art paper in a cramped bedroom in London's bleakly urban New Cross, the artist draws with a razor the lacy silhouettes of mighty trees, or the elaborate contours of spiralling mountain clouds, or paper slivers of a Concorde jet path. In his head is an idiosyncratic, surprisingly coherent image-mix that combines photos from 1950s editions of *Progressive Architecture*; film-stills from *North by Northwest* or James Bond flicks; the American frontier paintings of Bierstadt or Church; banal architectural renderings for sprawling leisure parks and community shopping centres and finally, the sweeping, anonymous urban vistas occasionally spotted in US television shows like *Quincy* or *Hart to Hart*. Although they are essentially two-dimensional and within the landscape genre, these collages are not really connected to painting, and Thorpe doesn't think like a painter. Somehow the works share something with Donald Judd, with their peculiar colour palette, the no hand-finish, the vague social utopianism – though with none of Judd's anti-figurative theorising and refusal of Pop. Thorpe also shares a minimalist love for seriality, for instance in a sequence of repeated square windows paced across a modernist façade in *Party Night*, 1997. One especially beautiful detail in *Live for Kicks* is a line of identical orange street lights, long and thin, stitched across the picture like the relentless road markings in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. The artist seems to relish the paper's ability to repeat its forms exactly, as if cut by machine, as if superhuman.

Thorpe's works before 1999 never adopted painting's traditional single, principal light source but preferred a flat, all-over light, resulting in an indefinable moment of the day. Is it twilight? Midnight? Midday? There will be no clocks after the revolution, just endless time. And endless space: immense, lean concourses of skyscrapers; giant octagonal constructions cantilevered over cliffs; great ribbons of never-ending bridges. Rockets will lift against gravity and a kind of weightlessness, as light as the paper itself, will reign once the dust has settled.

Crowned as our new post-revolutionary leader will surely be the *Rodeo King*, 1999, a 12 year-old former skateboarding champion immortalised in his official court portrait by David Thorpe. Our leader is seen from afar, unrecognisable, performing bicycle wheelies on an empty rooftop like Napoleon mounted on his rearing horse, charged and triumphant. Finally, someone in whom we can all really believe. ■

1. See Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, MIT Press, 1984, and more recently, Adolf Max Vogt et al, *Le Corbusier, the Noble Savage: Toward an Archaeology of Modernism*, MIT Press, 1998.

**Gilda Williams** is a writer and commissioning editor at Phaidon Press.

**David Thorpe**  
*We Never Sleep* 1998

**David Thorpe**  
*Rodeo King* 1999

