

that it barely needs to exist, are the only two works in which this subject is inescapable. Others relate to it only insofar as any abstract painting, whether this is declared or resisted, shares a gene with mysticism. Works by Mark Finch, Edward Chell, David Saunders and Simon Gallery are thus more or less successful on their own terms, but not on the curators'.

A consideration of the echoing perspectival depth employed in Friedrich's landscapes highlights the literal flatness of much contemporary art, certainly as it is represented here. Even at its stagiest, as in *The Wreck of 'The Hope'* itself, the space within which Friedrich roams is virtually boundless. By contrast, the artists in this exhibition prefer to slide down the surface of things. They select and isolate, training a hard spotlight on the objects of their various obsessions and glossing over the backgrounds from which they emerge. Apart from Neudecker's video, only David Thorpe's delicate paper collage *Strange Celestial Beam*, Sarah Beddington's shimmering *Untitled* and Paul Winstanley's characteristically quiet *Veil IV*, all 2000, make any attempt at an inquiry into the possibilities of a figurative response to the 19th-century painter's visual vocabulary.

In the midst of all this earnest analysis (Morley and his fellow swots have gone so far as to establish a Friedrich Society), it is possible to forget that *The Wreck of 'The Hope'*, along with the rest of Friedrich's oeuvre, is most immediately striking today as a classic

case of chocolate box mannerism, no less lamentable for having survived the rigours of art historical discrimination. It represents a kind of beauty that has become increasingly difficult to trust; one that now attracts cynicism and even laughter before awe. The lilac-tinted sky and looming icebergs in *The Wreck of 'The Hope'* are exaggerated to the point of high camp. Although it should be remembered that 'The Hope' was a common name for ships in this period, the allegory suggested by the title also reads as heavy-handed to contemporary sensibilities. That said, Friedrich remains an artist who is still discussed, even as many of his peers lie forgotten. For a man who aged 30 sketched his own burial and once attempted suicide, he now appears a peculiarly forward-looking character. Whether we empathise with the specificities of their individual visions or not, the alignment of an artists' work from a past era with current production is a brave experiment. That, in this instance, it cannot be said to have made for a satisfying exhibition should not be taken as an attack on the strategy itself. 'What appeals to us about old pictures', wrote Friedrich in a series of aphorisms on art dating from 1830, 'is primarily their devout naïveté. Yet it is not for us to become naïve, as many have, and mimic their mistakes, but rather to become devout, and imitate their virtues.' ■

Michael Wilson is a writer and artist.

'Because a Fire Was in My Head'  
installation view 2000



## ■ Because a Fire Was in My Head

South London Gallery April 5 to May 21

Did you know that at the bartleby.com website you can type in any line of poetry and be instantly told exactly which poem it's from, and even print the whole poem out on your own home printer? In fact, you can type in any word you wish and Bartleby will list every instance in English verse where the term has ever turned up! This I discovered browsing the web in the attempt to locate the Yeats poem that provides the title of this exhibition, curated by Jeremy Akerman and Zorica Vasic. (The poem is called *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, 1899, by William Butler Yeats, and it begins 'I went out to the hazel wood/Because a fire was in my head' – nice title.) The gallery brochure explains that this 'is an exhibition about scale and perception. The Renaissance thinker Giulio Camillo made the ambitious claim of being able to remember and therefore comprehend the universe by looking down on it from above. From this divine perspective he claimed "the individual beholds the macrocosm and holds it in their memory".' Camillo, it turns out (more web-browsing), was a remarkable fellow. He saw memory as a three-dimensional place where knowledge is structured architecturally and can be visited again and again – a virtual, conceptual space conceived in the 16th Century. Wow!

French intellectual Paul Virilio is another theoretical source behind this show. Especially pertinent is Virilio's analysis of aerial photography, developed at the service of military intelligence during World War II. Aerial bombers were thus endowed with the Eye of God, another kind of 'divine perspective' resulting in an all-seeing, militarised *deus ex machina*. This bird's-eye (or God's-eye, or B-52 bomber's-eye, whatever) perspective is the link between such otherwise unrelated



Keiko Sato  
Untitled 2000



artworks as Chad McCaill's delicate sequence of line drawings narrating a flying dream, *Missile Story*, 2000; Bridget Smith's cinematographic photographs *Landscape, Las Vegas*, 2000, and *The Strip, Las Vegas*, 1999-2000; Joshua Sofaer's performance *Take-Off*, 2000, in which he climbs bare-assed to a platform some 15 feet off the ground and flies those boomerang toy aeroplanes you've seen clerks toss and catch at Hamley's, or Yael Rubin's miniature, untitled three-dimensional landscape that looks like a tiny model of Stanley Kubrick's idea of Vietnam.

So far we've got French theorists, little-known 16th-century Italian philosophers, obscure lines of poetry – frankly the esoterica stacked up behind 'Because a Fire ...' felt kind of pretentious. And yet without it the show probably would have been even drabber. This wasn't the kind of relaxed lateral slippage in, say, Liam Gillick who inserts strange or clairvoyant meaning in the margins of history, or the isolated worlds of artists like Paul Noble, Jeremy Deller or Lucy McKenzie – even Mike Kelley – with their personal connectedness to peculiar and idiosyncratic cultural referents. No, I fear this felt pretty much like plain old intellectual posturing, relishing in one's relatively arcane sources. I suspect that this is why, despite its flaming title and some good works (don't miss Keiko Sato's garden of broken glass out back), 'Because a Fire ...' felt so lifeless.

That said, this was an ambitious and coherently delivered idea of curatorship as an intellectual practice. Akerman and Vasic used the cathedral-like gallery innovatively, imploding the space into the centre and claiming the whole room, right up to the ceiling, rather than just pinning the work to the edges, the walls, as usual. Moreover, to the curators' credit the artworks avoided the most literal illustrations of 'scale and perspective', say Liz Wright's scale-shifts or Peter Fend's aerial mapping, and were quite subtle (at times borderline indecipherable. What was Mike Kelley doing here?). Guillaume Bijl's selective historical perspective in *Souvenirs of the 20th Century*, 2000, Mary Evan's doctored kaleidoscopes called *Scope*, 2000, and Erasmus Schrouter's beautiful black and white photograph of an abandoned ship anchored in the Baltic Sea and reduced to a ruin as aerial target practice – all these

effectively reflect the same kind of vague bracketing of the 'scale and perspective' idea behind the exhibition itself. And, as desired, 'Because a Fire ...' succeeded in posing more questions than it claimed or even wished to answer. For example, if the one-point perspective of Renaissance painting connects to such technological inventions as the telescope and later the camera obscura, how indeed has our advanced and advancing techno-visual landscape expanded the artist's contemporary perspective – and vice versa?

Plenty to ponder, eh? 'Because a Fire Was in My Head' is hard work, and the pleasure gained fairly slight. Most of the artworks suffer a kind of anaemia, and as I wondered around the gallery I began to imagine myself as some sort of weird army art-nurse in the barracks of a wartime art-hospital, the ailing artworks lying quietly all around me. To be fair, Akerman/Vasic and myself, I'd say we simply occupy different camps. I admire curating that betrays contemporary art's wit and intrusive intimacy with life, while 'Because a Fire ...' prefers to position art as distant, hermetic, as out of reach as the earth from an aeroplane. ■

**Gilda Williams** is a writer and Commissioning Editor for contemporary art at Phaidon Press.

## ■ Zero Gravity

**Cornerhouse Manchester** March 25 to May 14

'Ljubljana', the Cornerhouse brochure tells us, 'is ... rapidly establishing itself as a European cultural capital with a reputation for cross-disciplinary work.' This observation heralds 'a sampler of contemporary practice, combining architecture and theatre design, conceptual art and performance', curated by London's salon3 in collaboration with the Slovene National Museum of Contemporary Art, Moderna Galerija.

Cornerhouse has a track record of presenting work from the less obvious countries in what we still call Eastern Europe. But their 1996 exhibition of contemporary Lithuanian art, 'Bread and Salt', was a more substantial and memorable affair than this current sampler of cross-