

sent something within the painting space but uses that space to make something available to the viewer in terms of sight that includes the painting among everything else. The material of the painting holds and acts on the space in which it is seen, rather than being held by the space to make available to sight something within the painting alone.

Charlton has talked about the 'reality' of his paintings being 'found in the reality of the space', and also of a degree of 'equality' that he searches for in his paintings (see AM149). Both statements throw attention away from the paintings themselves as objects, and towards every aspect of the activity of their production, presentation and reception within a carefully defined context of sight and space. It is this that puts Charlton's single-colour paintings at an extreme remove from the strategy of creating monochrome paintings as the Modernist endpoint to end all endpoints. In one of the four small rooms that make up the Cairn Gallery Charlton had positioned two single-panel *Square Paintings*. The larger of the two hangs opposite a window, its light colour echoing the daylight that spills into the room. The smaller painting hangs on the opposite wall to the right of the window, darker in colour it is nevertheless not in shadow. It is impossible to focus just on these two paintings as monochromatic objects, instead they carry out a visual conversation within a space that does not so much contain the painting, as it holds the same visual emphasis as the paintings. This is emphasised by a work such as *Square Painting in 5 Horizontal Parts* 1996, at Annelly Juda, in which the description of it as a 'Square Painting' includes the gaps between the five panels which, by extension, also include the walls and surrounding space of the whole gallery. Charlton's paintings, at their best, exert a visible hold on both positive and negative space that is, in essence, sculptural.

Another aspect of Charlton's deployment of an 'equal presence' is his use of repetition (he has been making a grey painting doggedly since the late 1960s) and the use of a non-colour – grey – that, neither black nor white, is as much a non-colour as it is a colour. Although the paintings at Annelly Juda and the Cairn Gallery employ extreme intensities of grey, between being very dark or very light, this echoes the various use of natural and artificial light found within the two galleries that, again, throws the subject of the paintings back onto the event of their visual apprehension not as an object but as a place.

There are two ways in which Charlton's work can then be seen to be different in tenor from the more formally-obsessed work of most painters of monochrome canvases. In 1975 Charlton used a quotation of Giacometti as an epigraph for his own work – 'the adventure, the great adventure, is to see something unknown appear each day, in the same face. That is greater than any journey around the world'. What this seems to imply is that each grey painting is different from each other grey painting because, quite apart from the objective forms of the painting changing, the context which forms part of the

painting changes every time the painting is hung and, more acutely, every time that someone looks at it. As a result, and secondly, the formal, concrete physical facts of the painting is not all there is to see, but instead exists, as he has admitted, as 'a vehicle to make you see art. I feel that art in the painting is some abstract view and the way the painting is made, painted and shown, is to try and put that feeling over'. The almost romantic nature of such a view, a 'searching for the unknown', is of a very different order from that found in Law which, although similarly romantic in a search for a contemplative and locational space is, even so, more concerned with the traditional representational properties of the painted Modernist and reductively monochromatic object.

Daniel Buren's *At the Boundary*, 1967/96, currently visible at 43 Charterhouse Square, provides a useful comparison with Charlton's concern with context, repetition and the meaning of a sculptural space of visibility. The work consists of yellow and white striped paper that has been pasted onto the interior side of the gallery's street windows. Although, as printed paper, it exists as an object, the work's meaning is acquired not from this objectual field but, realising that 'a thing never exists in itself', is experienced within a field of vision that takes, here, the particular space between street and gallery, outside and inside, in revealing the visual and ideological connection art has with its surroundings. Where Buren makes an in-situ work, or Charlton makes a grey painting as opposed to a literal grey monochrome, both oppose the traditional trajectory of Modernist painting and open up the space in which painting hangs, rather than the space of painting itself and alone. Both artists, as a result create a rupture in this linear progression towards a fictional endpoint and use painting not as a representational structure, or as a means to create a formalist marriage between subject and content, but to split the two apart in sight. ■

Andrew Wilson is a writer, art historian and curator.

■ Fischli & Weiss

Serpentine Art Gallery London June 12 to July 21

In Russian author Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevangur*, he describes the pursuits of a hermit, who carved all his household objects – pots and pans, a lamp, an iron – out of wood. This frustrating simulacra does not fill the house but only reiterates its emptiness, with objects indicating all that is *missing*, rather than what's *there*. Peter Fischli and David Weiss' captivating works are like these purposeless stand-ins, somehow echoing recognisability but not at all real. Like the house of wooden replicas, the work by this Swiss duo could be generated endlessly, or just as easily and abruptly discontinued, with no natural starting or stopping point. This is particularly true of the two principal works exhibited here: 96

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Fischli & Weiss
 Untitled 1995

hours worth of video tapes, first shown at the 1995 Venice Biennale, documenting idealised, ordinary activities (farming labours, veterinary offices, car rides, sporting events) and multiplied by dozens of panoptical monitors scattered in a good three rooms of the Serpentine. Likewise, the untitled, *trompe l'oeil* sculpture of a worker's unfinished building site – with meticulously modelled polyurethane replicas of 2x4s, Styrofoam cups, cigarette butts or Nivea cannisters, all indistinguishable from reality – has no natural limits, and could be extended throughout the whole gallery, or a gymnasium, an airplane hangar, whatever. With no temporal or spatial limits framing their work it becomes rather encyclopaedic, like the 'Dictionary of Received Ideas' which ends Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a novel Fischli and Weiss admire. The care and insight with which the French novelist identified, listed and succinctly defined common platitudes (BALDNESS: Always 'premature'; SUMMER: Always 'unusual', see WINTER) are like the literary equivalent of Fischli and Weiss' compendium of the ordinary: all-inclusive, at once discriminating and random, and with an implicit, accusatory comment on their seemingly objective observations.

Fischli and Weiss' work is suspiciously void of autobiography, as if they were scientifically planning to fill a time capsule with unconnected snippets of the late 20th-century commonplace. They connect viewing their art with a 'park bench' experience, which can be indeterminately prolonged until disinterest sets in. Indeed real life seems tangential to their work, observed, scrutinised even, but not lived. The pair seem bent on impersonating identities not their own; the activities depicted in the videos, for example, are those of *other* people's lives. Similarly, the unfinished workers' site results in imagery belonging to another kind of profession, another kind of builder. Their *Kanalvideo* (*Canal video*), 1992, spliced from existing footage of the remarkably clean Zurich sewers, takes them to unseen places, circumstances far

removed from their own. They are alert observers of a reality which is not held within the framework of their own lives, and this alertness is disguised as passive documentation. It is this distance that makes Fischli and Weiss' ordinariness, for all its antiseptic familiarity, quite remote, bizarre and almost sinister.

The only relief is provided by a sort of ironic humour, but the jokes are more gag-like than witty, and don't sustain it over the long haul. The idea of portraying the mountain paradise of Switzerland as an endless series of Alpine *autobahn* tunnels is certainly a comical portrayal of the contemporary Mercedes-ridden Swiss landscape. The imagery in the 36 Venice Biennale videos is neatly divided into three types: work time, free time and travel time, to and from a depicted activity (one could argue that this is actually an excruciatingly aimless road movie). The pair claim that a great deal of editing goes into their rambling video compilations, and this could trigger the perverse desire in the viewer actually to sit through them all, not once but repeatedly, to substitute them for life itself, to learn to anticipate the synthetic, harmless non-events on the screen the way we all grew familiar with Brian Eno's ambient music in the early 1980s and could actually hum along to the nothingness. The artists' use of video is deliberately puzzling: surely a still photograph could provide the same information and imagery as these moving pictures. Is the indulgence in video a comment on the accessibility of technological excess? The insistence on maintaining the empty soundtracks – the drone of a snowblower, a puppy's occasional whimpering, rhythmic windshield wipers, generic disco crap – is also symptomatic of the artists' backseat view of reality. These soundtracks barely register as sound-worthy at all; can we even hear them?

If there is one thing that might connect all Fischli and Weiss' work, it is their sort of alchemical fascination with the invisible. When is a sculpture really there? When is an image non-existent? How can you tell if art, or indeed life,

is actually occurring? The precariousness of the works' existence, their constant verging on the edge of collapsing or vanishing altogether, locates the work in a kind of leaky end-zone between reality and invisibility, and thus truly does, like the successful art of old, provide a window onto a world we see but never look at.

In *Surrli* (subtitled *Placebo*), 1986, randomly generated, Spirograph-inspired images are stacked in a slide carousel and projected; Peter Pan-like, they 'work' (judging from the subtitle) as art only if we believe, but are otherwise invisible. *Le rayon vert*, 1990 (recalling the title of a film by another master of the ordinary, Eric Rohmer), is a hapless, mildly patterned transparent plastic cup forced to spin gracelessly on a mechanical turntable. A beam of closely projected light creates a pathetic, impoverished disco light-show, sputtering unspectacular shadows on the wall. The 'excitement' of this piece – not unlike the dull discotheques displayed on the monitors – exists 'in the eye of the beholder', and is as barely-there as the 'sculptural beauty' in the random still-lives of workers' tools pushed to the sides of a gallery.

The implied meaning in all of their work is thick, unmistakable, directed; it has been described as tragic and melancholy, which it is. Look again: behind the reassuring veneer of non-committal imagery is an accusatory portrait not of the lives allegedly portrayed, but of the distant observer – ourselves. ■

This exhibition runs concurrently with **Peter Fischli & David Weiss: In a Restless World** at the **Walker Art Center**, Minneapolis, which will then tour to Philadelphia, Columbus, San Francisco, Boston and Wolfsburg through to 1998.

Gilda Williams is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

■ Julian Opie

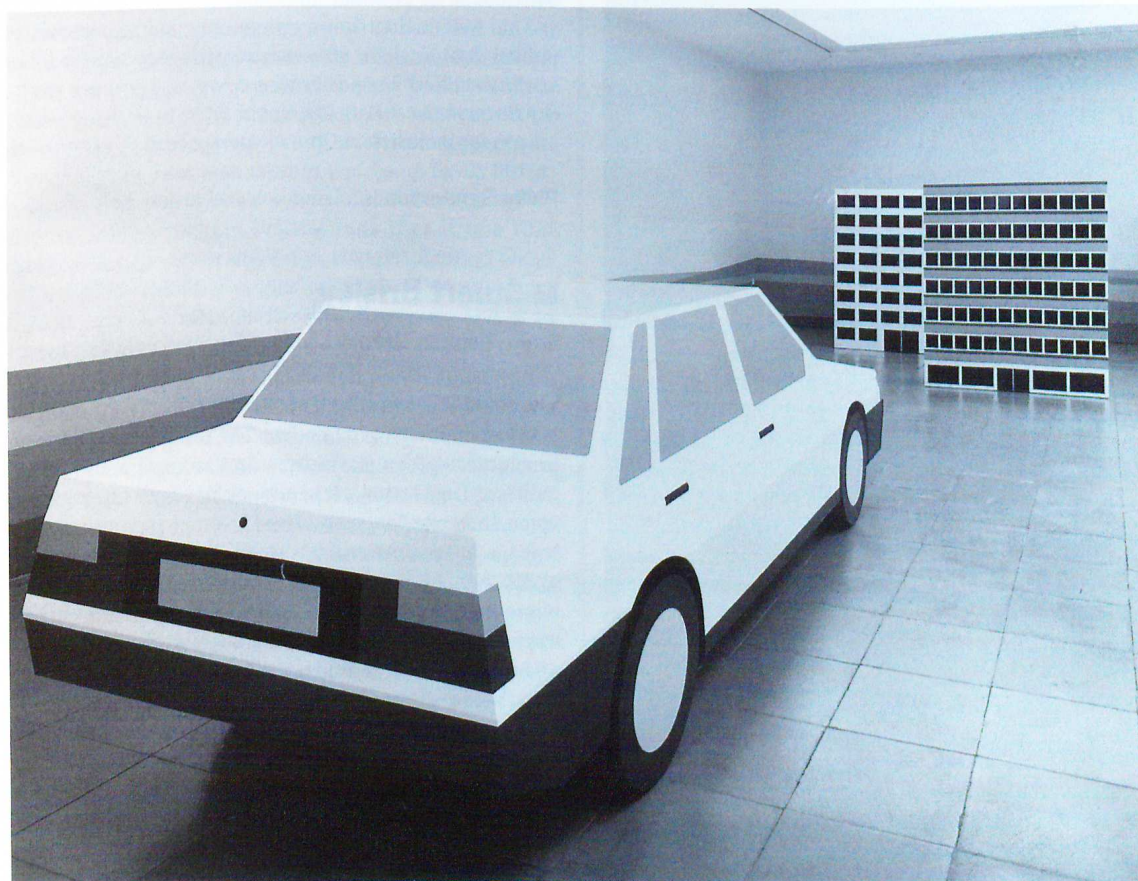
Lisson Gallery London June 10 to July 13

Since Julian Opie's retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in 1993 he has become something of an invisible man in Britain; rarely mentioned in the many column inches devoted to his more provocative contemporaries, or included in the Capital's continual round of alternative group shows.

Still Opie need hardly worry for it is over a decade since he passed all but seamlessly from student to professional artist, and one now imagines him occupying some form of artistic hyperspace, a world of international travel and airy sunlit studios, far removed from everyday indignities.

It is not only Opie himself who appears somewhat unreal, since the earliest lyrical painted metal fabrications, his work, too, has sought a tension between the simulated and the actual. The stainless steel, aluminium and glass cabinets and vents that followed appeared to occupy some parallel universe, one step removed from the functional objects on which they were based or the minimalist sculptures they faintly echoed.

Merging Mondrian with MFI, Opie produced a number of pieces in the late 80s and early 90s reminiscent of shelving units or exhibition stands. These pieces appeared to be a latter-day expression of Le Corbusier's Modulor; a system for dividing any space into a number of harmoniously proportioned rectangles, resulting in a verisimilitude more usually associated with traditional English vernacular architecture than the tower blocks and office developments of the 60s. The Modulor is an open-ended mechanism, no one configuration is inherently better than another, selection is determined by practical application. In Opie's non-functional environment there are no such limitations and a work such as



Julian Opie

You are in a car 1996

You see an office building (Nos 1 & 3)

1996

There are hills in the distance 1996