



Simon Moretti  
Shade 2000

which would otherwise serve quite well for painterly reverie or escape is unceremoniously interrupted by the words 'angela leave your body'. The wall behind the painting is exposed, as is the artificiality of the landscape, the easy calm of kitsch aesthetics and the urgency of responding to the message. Toren's chosen phrases vary widely but all come across as being addressed outwards to us, or at least to someone in among the audience with us. His other painting commands 'attention please' in the manner of someone preparing to speak. In a sense the elegance of these works' conception has put them in an uncomfortable space alongside more aestheticised art that doesn't share their desire to engage with a model of life as lived experience. But such is the connective power of text, even today, that they manage to resist, remaining primarily vehicles for communication rather than merely receptacles for our gaze. A pair of Fiona Banner's trademark pieces sit more ambiguously on that line, thanks to Moretti's selective curation. The letters 'wp wp wp wp wp' fill an entire drawing and stand for the sound of helicopter blades cutting through the air. It is only the title of the piece, *Helicopter*, 1998, that moves these repeated symbols into language, just as it is purely her identification of a neon globe as a full stop that causes it to signify literally as part of the systems of grammar and syntax. But this full stop should surely have been the end rather than the beginning of her series of punctuation.

The representation of text as image is a familiar way of positioning a piece of work to be read between different symbolic registers, with a history going back through

Marcel Broodthaers, Jasper Johns and John Cage to Dada and Cubism. Its rapid assimilation into popular culture has somewhat neutered the original transgressive thrill however, and artists have had to seek other forms and practices with which to cross-pollinate their work. Some kind of improvisatory performance can offer support in two ways, through a renewed emphasis on presence without all the metaphysical baggage, and by becoming an echo of the creative imperative itself. ■

Mark Wilsher is an artist.

## ■ Melanie Carvalho

Cubitt Gallery London February 10 to April 7

'Describe a landscape that represents your idea of home.' Artist Melanie Carvalho asks this question of some 30 friends and acquaintances as well as countless others, by writing it at the top of a blank sheet of paper. The most succinct response scrawled below was a perfect circle, an empty Zen-like enigma at the centre of the page; the most elaborate a five-page detailed manuscript. Other responses included drawings and poems, song lyrics and diagrams. On view at Cubitt are the artist's painted renditions of these descriptions on small, standard-sized canvases set alongside large-scale watercolour and photographic collages of paradisiacal landscapes culled from travel magazines and painted fantasy backdrops.

## A Measure of Reality

9 March – 28 April 2002

Dan Graham, Mona Hatoum, Lizzie Hughes,  
Richard Long, Robert Morris, Euan Uglow, Gary Woodley

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While the show itself is rather modest, the quality of the paintings being deliberately weak and the relationship between these and Carvalho's collage pieces unresolved (something about imaginary landscapes), her collaborative research did generate some noteworthy results. The most astonishing conclusion from her friendly poll, gathered in a little publication called *Describe a Landscape* (the most interesting artefact here and which probably would have sufficed to document the whole project; no exhibition needed, really) was just how uniform the responses were.

Over and over again the same outdoor images are conjured up: coastlines, sprawling horizons, big skies, forests, sun and snow. The question could have been equally 'Describe a landscape that represents your idea of paradise' and the responses would have remained identical. The other recurring theme was, not unsurprisingly, childhood: the home we grew up in. For them the question effectively was, 'Where were you happiest?', and the term 'home' implied loss and nostalgia, our distance from our true home in time and space. This is especially noticeable from respondents describing their faraway childhoods in Sudan, Uganda or India, who must travel back there often in their memories, judging from the detail supplied. Surprisingly, the least repeated theme is the home as an interior space, the smells of kitchen and the warmth of one's bed. In no case (at least among those documented in the book; the paintings suggest slightly otherwise) did the notion of home suggest sex, or property, or anything as banal as interior decoration. Instead it seemed to draw out the poet in everybody, the dreamy, childlike visionary, tinged with melancholy. This would confirm Gaston Bachelard's thesis behind his *Poetics of Space*: 'The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for [our] thoughts, memories and dreams'.

Sometimes the responses were humorous, like one contributor's description of a childhood memory of tree-climbing, the branches of his favourite tree forming an imagined seat and keyboard where he could perch and play 'like a little Rick Wakeman'. Another architectural extravaganza divides each function of life – sleep,

storage, work, food – into its own floor in a multi-storied townhouse; inhabiting the ideal home 'like living in a filing cabinet'. (This fantasy produces, by the way, one of Carvalho's best little paintings, a kind of doll's house/cross section of modern life.) Finally one frequent-flyer made a lovely drawing of his seat in an aeroplane, gazing at the tray set lovingly before him.

So much has been written and theorised about the idea of home, from Bachelard to Anthony Vidler; look up the word 'home' in your dictionary and the scope of its usage is immediately obvious, stretching from 'homebrew' to 'homerun'. Type in the term 'home' on Google and your computer will crash: every single www.site on earth has a homepage. Nevertheless Carvalho's project did contribute to the vast body of theory on the idea of home in at least one constructive way. One psychoanalytical platitude that this work dispelled was Freud's notion of home (and 'homeliness', in contrast with 'unhomeliness') as the impossible yet insistent desire to return to the safety of the womb. His contemporaries the Dada and Surrealist artists constructed such places, like Tristan Tzara's 'interuterine' house, Dalí's soluble habitation and the 'soft' houses of Matta. And yet virtually none of the 'homes' in Carvalho's collection were nest-like and hyper-protected (although, interestingly enough, nearly all are solitary). By far, most of the descriptions here offered a sense of vast space, open fields and skies and beaches, the freedom of one's street or a mountain top. Even the bricks-and-mortar responses usually stretched out to a garden, and even those who tucked themselves into imaginary beds were busy looking out the window. Perhaps this was the result of Carvalho's decision to toss in the unexpected word 'landscape' in combination with 'home', but this was an effective way literally to open the imaginations of her co-participants. ■

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

Melanie Carvalho  
*Untitled Landscape*  
 (Painting) 1998-2001

