

Francis Alÿs
Guards 2004



crossing) within a walk. As often with Alÿs, it is hard to define what the artwork consists of: the performance (the walk), the documentation (a photograph or film) or the object derived from or in preparation for it (normally a painting). If there are elements in these pieces that can be related to the practices of other artists (*Pebble Walk* to Richard Long, *Knots* to a certain strand of poetic conceptualism common in Mexico), what differentiates them is their inconclusive character. The form they give to a certain idea is, for Alÿs, not necessarily 'the good one' as he will most likely rework them in a different medium or in another location. For example, *The Commuters*, 2000-05, which consists of a painting that can be taken home in the evening by a member of the public and brought back the next morning, recalls *Walking a Painting*, 2002, in which Alÿs did so in the streets of Los Angeles. An *Untitled* painting from 1998 that shows a man by a big house with railings, holding a stick against them while he walks, is now *Railings*, 2004, a video that shows Alÿs walking around the crescents of Regency London, rattling the railings (and cars).

The simple construction of this film, based on the percussive rhythm and the editing, gives room to a picture of the

city, and of a certain use of it – a playful, subversive, if inoffensive one. The same structure can be found in *Guards*, 2004-05, to some extent a reconstruction of another piece (*Duett*, from 1999). The film follows 64 Coldstream Guards from the moment they enter the City's Square Mile on their own, until they find each other and, once they are all together, march into the closest bridge and disperse. The editing and combination of the different marches make the film a musical score with different movements – an image strengthened by the impression that Alÿs is somehow directing the soldiers from behind. But this time there is something different. The background of *Guards* is, like in *Railings* (Regency London) or *The Nightwatch*, 2004 (The National Portrait Gallery), British establishment: the city's financial centre. But in *Guards* the protagonists are also part of it: they belong to the oldest continuously serving regular regiment of the British Army. After looking at them for some time while they march along the empty streets with their bayonets in hand, they stop being a tourist attraction to become the embodiment and symbol of a certain idea of order. Here a non-committal gaze must give its place to another, one that explores the social and political history and actuality implied by the characters and their décor. Something like what Alÿs did in 1998-99 when he modelled and battered an army of Zapatista soldiers in plaster (*61 out of 60*) to reflect on resistance and vulnerability in a country where he had not long before presented himself as a tourist. ■

PABLO LAFUENTE is the managing editor of *Afterall*.

■ Roderick Buchanan

Camden Arts Centre London September 23 to November 13

Whenever I watch football, I think of Barbara Kruger. *You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men*, she wrote in 1981, printed over the image of an all-male fight. What would happen, I wonder, if the football fans in the stands, instead of wearing overpriced team strips, all wore identical T-shirts bearing the Kruger slogan. Imagine: 'You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men!' emblazoned thousands of times on tier after tier of cheering fans. Would it change the game?

Football has been central to Glaswegian artist Roderick Buchanan's practice since the 90s, and occupies half his current exhibition. The centrepiece is *Tombez la Chemise*, 2002: spliced TV footage of youthful players taking off their shirts on the playing field, in exhaustion or jubilation. Rippling muscles, gleaming jewellery, startling tattoos: it's all sexily brought to light in these moments of fatigue and glory. It's erotic, it's sculptural; it reveals the strip-off ritual as fulfilling both the narcissistic needs of the players and the star-fucking curiosity of the fans, and the gratification is palpable.

21st Annual Open Exhibition

23 November – 11 December 2005

Wednesday – Sunday 11 – 4

For submission details go to the 'What's on' page of the website

cafe gallery projects london
southwark park

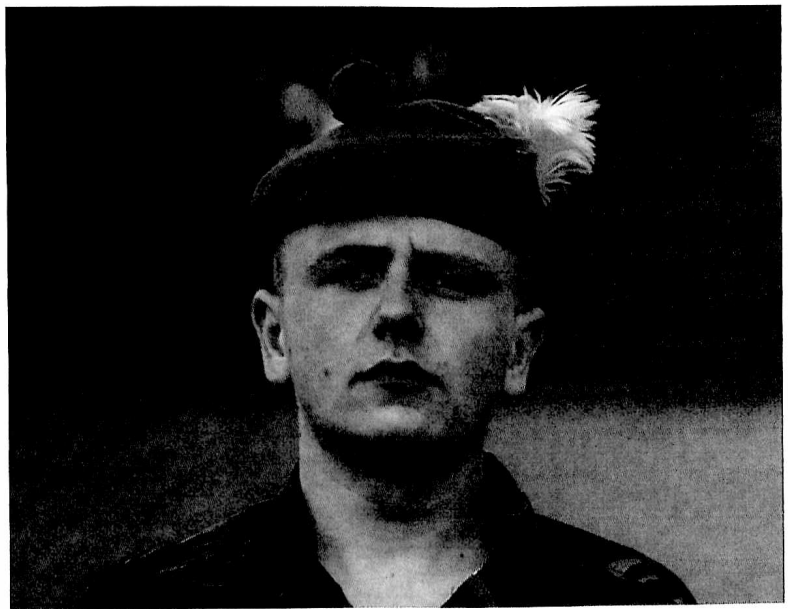


www.cafegalleryprojects.org

While most of Buchanan's work has concentrated on such mass cultural phenomena, the artist now demonstrates a more intellectual slant with forays into political history. *Thomas Muir Help Desk*, 2003, is a text-heavy, mural/biography of an 18th-century Scottish renegade, Thomas Muir, who sowed political unrest among the Glasgow poor. Arrested and exiled, today he is largely forgotten – though not by Buchanan and fellow alumni of Thomas Muir High School, East Dunbartonshire, Glasgow. The subtle autobiographical connection between the artist and his subject matter is what keeps our interest in his work, why he remains one of Britain's most viable post-Brit Pop artists, winning Beck's Futures in 2000, a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award in 2004, and being included in two recent Venice Biennales. Never particularly innovative on a formal level, the artist relies on repetition to fill his chosen frames. On the plus side, Buchanan seems utterly true to himself. He seems truly interested in football, in his Scottish heritage and in the 60s/70s Britain he grew up in. Through his own participation he reveals both the pleasure of belonging and the arbitrariness of membership, all fed by a real curiosity to take stock of the unique faces within every 'team': their ordinariness, their uniqueness, and some essential human connection with the artist himself which goes beyond local allegiances.

In his recent film, *History Painting*, 2004, the camera pans across close-ups of two armies which battled alongside one another some 200 years ago, the Madras Regiment in India and the Scottish Infantry Division closer to home. As if walking the paces of a very slow parade-ground inspection, we observe face after face of the lower ranks of the military. One squad is uniformly white-skinned, the other dark – apparently indifferent to wearing the colours of their ancestors' colonisers. Somewhat more polished and aestheticised than earlier work, *History Painting* continues Buchanan's fascination with the real faces which anonymously fill the history books. By lingering on each, he contradicts the trappings of sameness – a uniform, a common rank and purpose – while providing his portraits with a serial quality which allows us instant access to them.

Stirring his admittedly limited pot of interests – notions of belonging, language, and the variety of the human face – within an equally limited formal vocabulary, it is Buchanan's humour which brings his portraits to life. Buchanan has written a terrifically funny, autobiographical essay called 'How I Feel' (from 1994, reproduced in the catalogue for this show), which is arguably his most evocative portrait ever. 'The longer you hang out with drunks, the shorter the odds are to hold onto all your teeth', or, 'I've learned recently that real Toffs don't get their ears pierced', he muses. When Buchanan manages to combine in his visual work this same, highly idiosyncratic blend of street humour, working-class references, self-reflection, keen observation, and empathy for his subject, he hits just the right place between the dumbness of the work and meaningful self-revelation. *Thomas Muir Help Desk* is perhaps saved by its witty title, but *History Painting*, which is deadly serious, starts to feel overloaded with post-colonial



critique – not, I am guessing, the artist's overriding concern.

One hopes Buchanan doesn't get his broken nose ('My face looks lived-in but some lassies go for that') buried too deep in the history books and preserves his talent for humour, which is probably what prevents his formally unadventurous work from falling flat. ■

GILDA WILLIAMS is a writer and lecturer in contemporary art at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London.

Roderick Buchanan
History Painting 2004
film still

■ Ways of Living

Kettle's Yard Cambridge October 1 to November 20

This show puts forward a vision of domestic space. It presents the home as a stage for personalised furniture and fittings, and the artist as a kind of lifestyle guru, an expert in the theological benefits of interior decoration. After a sustained rise in real-estate prices across the rich world, home improvement is a peculiarly contemporary fixation. But the show also recalls the late 19th Century, looking back to Art Nouveau and the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and to the Nabis and their cult of the interior. Like Bonnard and Vuillard in the 1890s, the artists here imagine the home as a thoughtfully furnished refuge from the strains of modernity.

Jorge Pardo has filled a room with suspended lights that take the form of large biomorphic plates of yellow glass and curvilinear wooden braces that hold the plates together. The plates look like petals or shells and the braces like corals. In both the use of coloured glass and the luscious, organic imagery, the installation echoes the work of Art Nouveau

Twilight Shift John Plowman

Exhibition open: 7 November – 22 December 2005 Artist's talk: 28 November at 6.30pm

SHILLAMSMITH 122 Great Titchfield Street, London W1W 6ST Telephone: 020 7637 0057 Gallery and coffee bar open Monday – Saturday: 8am – 8pm