

is a room lit by a special bulb, developed to emit a light with the exact frequency of moonlight. That moonlight is so entwined in cultural representations of romance on one hand and lunatics on the other makes the blank room all the more poignant.

It seems natural that Conceptual Art would evoke alchemy: its pioneers were, after all, able to turn fire bricks, photostats, inert gas, dissolved versions of Clement Greenberg's essays and other everyday materials into art. What is surprising about this exhibition is that it shows how the 'dematerialisation' of the art object, as Lippard described it in 1973, has been subtly overtaken by the alchemy of the art object. And to understand alchemy you need to be an intuitive mystic to catch the transient experience of viewing the work, and then a rationalist to figure out where it has taken you. ■

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In Search of Alchemic Times

235 Brompton Road London 5 August to 3 September

Does the title of this exhibition, 'In Search of Alchemic Times', curated by Cecilia Wee, intentionally ghost that of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, a book in which deep introspection and a cutting examination of the broader cultural field led to radical transformation? In Proust, the work of the aesthetically successful artist is exemplary, a transforming of the base material of the everyday into the gold of what, in other contexts, is known as the philosopher's stone; the materialisation, then, of the Good and the True out of the abandoned or inane. Should this apparent comparison hold water, 'In Search of Alchemic Times' would convey a double emphasis upon actions of an alchemical import. The press release remarks that in this show 'commonplace resources are reconfigured ... to conjure up new utopias', though such a claim is rather grand given the relatively small scale of the display, as well as the problematic nature of what exactly one might mean by 'utopias', novel or otherwise.

But perhaps the pitch to Proust is way off the mark. One of the first transformations to note here is that of turning a jewellery shop into a gallery. It seems, superficially, an appropriate venue for a presentation that is partly centred upon crystals and the bringing together of diverse elements from which to realise something new. The press release, in places rather hard to follow, makes much of how using such a shop raises the matter of value in relation to the 'economically precarious' present, but this claim is optimistic at best. The shop is available only because the recession has brought a decline in currency and value. Surely, then, it is possible to read its deployment in a negative way: as removing value from the works of art placed within it, a point in sharp contrast to the theme of alchemy, with its weighty connotations of enlightenment and the materialisation of Heaven on Earth. Conversely, one might propose that using an empty shop as an exhibition venue is itself a counter to decline – can putting works of art into a formerly commercial space be regarded as progressive? The ambiguities here are unresolved, a curatorial confusion requiring more extensive cogitation.

Furthermore, the form of the shop, with its glass display cabinets, wood panelling and multiple mirrors, is itself arguably



installation view

a curator's nightmare, its aesthetic pressing down upon the visitor at every turn. This is a perennial problem with respect to the use of 'interesting' spaces for the showing of art, and difficult to deal with. Here, where ceiling-high shelves remain partly empty, the sense is of something wrongly removed or of space poorly employed.

Of the dozen artists in 'In Search of Alchemic Times', some fare considerably better than others. Liliane Lijn's *Earth-art Jewellery*, 2008-10, and her *Prism Stones*, 1977-88, occupy one of the window bays, as though 'sculptures to wear' were the latest west London fashion. Her prisms look like they might be properly 'alchemical' too, a nice technology for the modern age to get to grips with. Similarly, *Unrealised Projects* (Sam Ely and Lynn Harris) have done some thoughtful realising, presenting textual documentation of unsubstantiated projects by, among others, David Cunningham and Claes Oldenburg. This is juxtaposed with black jewellery display cushions suggestive of microwaved Malevichs, and a miniature silver model of Oldenburg's 1965 *Banana in the Process of Peeling*, 2011, which, as a mere maquette, becomes, as it were, unrealised a second time. These items occupy mirrored shelves within a central vitrine, the reflections of reflections echoing the potentially endless chain of 'unrealisations' we are given to peruse.

In the opposite vitrine, Peter Lewis and Makiko Nagaya's *Cuntville*, 2011, a work borrowing its title from William Burroughs, is a mixed-media micro-archive of drawings, notebooks, tarot cards, crystals and crutches, together with printed material relating to realised projects in which these two artists have been involved. The crutches, painted black and white and partly covered with glitter, recall Marcel Broodthaers's use of coloured bones, and there is a beautiful orange Rorschach-pattern painting, the hinged or winged form of which becomes one more enantiomorphic moment in the show's engaging subplot of mirrored surfaces. Lewis and Nagaya, in making what amounts to a miniature exhibition within the overall presentation, point directly to the occultist trope conventionally recounted thus: 'as above, so below'.

Several other artists work with a plethora of petite objects within restricted spaces: Tom Badley's *Egg Inversion III*, 2007, and Jenny Walshe's *Nietzsche is for Lovers*, 2009, are complex formations of assembled elements, Walshe including a copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* pulverised

with gunshot. The large glass case containing Charlesworth, Lewandowski & Mann's video works *Museum*, 2009, and *Ziggurat*, 2010, is packed tight with switches, cables and other paraphernalia, emphasising the dismal physicality of electronic information systems. The documentaries on view were cobbled together from hundreds of short clips lifted from YouTube, forming what Gavin Bryars, writing of his own work in 1981, described as 'entirely synthetic' works of art.

Aura Satz's sound-sculpture *AEIOU*, 2010, comprises five hearing trumpets, each of which emits a particular musical tone expressly linked to a given vowel. It recalls, perhaps inadvertently, Arthur Rimbaud's *Vowels*, 1871, in which vowels are linked to specific colours and which contains, appropriately for the present context, a reference to that which 'alchemy prints on heavy, studious brows'.

Rowena Harris dislocates and realigns the geometric mannerisms of Modernism. Her pieces are most successful when, as with her mixed-media sculpture *Airstream*, 2010, included here, she literally reconfigures (rather than merely bashes about) objects alluding to so-called Significant Form. Unfortunately, the works by Steven Ounanian and Nathan Witt are mechanical and wooden in more than their materials, and the exhibition as a whole, irrespective of its serious ambitions, leaves much to be desired. The artist as alchemist – aka magician, esoteric know-it-all, or unreconstructed genius – is a fantasy that has long been under attack, and one still needy of critique, not celebration. As for Utopia, that's one thing you'll never find in Knightsbridge. ■

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Peter Hujar: Thek's Studio 1967

Maureen Paley London 7 September to 2 October

Peter Hujar's exhibition at Maureen Paley consists of a collection of 12 photographs taken during a 1967 visit to his close friend Paul Thek's studio. Discovered during a period of research for Thek's 2010 Whitney retrospective, Hujar's photos were shot in colour instead of his customary black and white. The original idea was to use the images to publicise Thek's 1967 'Tomb' exhibition at the Stable Gallery, New York: the show in which the three-tiered pink ziggurat, housing the legendary hyperrealist

Peter Hujar
*Thek working on the
Tomb figure 1967*



sculpture of himself as a giant dead hippie, was unveiled. Despite the rather workaday impetus for the shoot, this was no display of dispassionately neutral PR photos. Instead, Hujar's images offered a uniquely intimate and absorbing view of his enigmatic friend's creative process.

The images of Thek and his studio fall into three rough categories: details of his studio walls, wider shots of the artist at work and a few traditionally framed artist portraits. As the pair probably envisioned at the time, the wider studio shots help to illustrate the actual business of finishing work for a show, providing a practical insight into Thek's working process. In *Thek working on the Tomb figure*, 1967, the artist stands at a drawing desk in the centre of his small studio while the dead hippie, as if anaesthetised, lies on a table in front. There is a real Shelleyan bizarreness to the scene, as if Thek has been surreptitiously snapped preparing for the imminent reanimation of his own Greenwich Village Frankenstein. Seen from an elevated vantage point, *Thek 254 East 3rd Street Studio*, 1967, shows the orderly clutter of the artist's workspace. It is made strange by the presence of uncannily human moulds that look just like Thek's face. Stranger still is *Thek, Oakleyville, Fire Island*, 1967, an image of the artist strumming a guitar in his second and more domestic studio space (a cottage in the island town where he got his beach glow, just south of New York) surrounded by sculpted hands. In fact hands, whether close up details of the artist's own – *Study of Thek's hand*, 1967 – or disembodied sculpted variants of the hippie's, figure in almost all the photographs.

The recurring appearance of these appendages, as well as the giant in the room, pulls Hujar's dusky lit images into the dreamlike realm of the surreal. They seem to hover between the informative, contextualising requirements of the publicity shot (here is the artist and here are his tools) and the peculiarly eerie ambience of something far more elegiac.

In *Paul Thek with hand sculptures*, 1967, the artist sits at a desk, arms folded in awkward resolution with two large, fingerless hand sculptures placed in front of him. This is as close as we get to a conventionally posed artist-and-his-artworks image. On the other hand there is *Paul Thek*, 1967, a large, heavily silhouetted image of the artist's face inhabiting another, more disquieting place. Warmly lit and cloaked in shadow, this impressionistic portrait hangs at a distance from all the rest, depicting Thek as a haunted, solitary figure. Much is made of Thek's status as an art-world outsider, somebody on the fringes of established practice. But, far from cultivating that image, he considered himself to be someone trying to make his way into the fold. In a 1965 letter to Susan Sontag he wrote, 'I fantasize + bargain: I will become a lily of the field once I become the Toast of the town.' But what Hujar embodies here, and throughout, is the loneliness of the hyperrealist sculptor; the solitude of an artist quietly duplicating himself, at a time when a large proportion of the city's artists were trying to make their work disappear completely.

Though the twilightish atmosphere of these photographs invited romantic interpretation, the fact that Hujar decided not to publish them in his lifetime could signify either way: perhaps they were too close to the bone to be exhibited, too intimate to be revealed; or perhaps the sombre stylisation and use of colour meant that the images never sat well with his other work.

All conjecture aside, the exhibition offers an intriguing glimpse into seldom seen aspects of both artists' practices; filling a coloured hole between Hujar's 1963 black and white photographs