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*Between Los Angeles and Leeds*

Originally printed as part of 'Common Place', published by Soup Gallery x Foolscape Editions to accompany Matthew Clifton & Faith Hughes' two-person exhibition.

The city, in all its restless motion, has long been the ideal subject for cinema. From the earliest glimpses of Parisian street life recorded by the Lumière Brothers through to the many, memorable representations of contemporary metropolises – Wong Kar-wai's Hong Kong, Sofia Coppola's Tokyo, Robert Altman's Los Angeles, The Safdie Brothers' New York – filmmakers have consistently been drawn to capture the urban environment. This has been both to convey the sense of a specific city as a place and the experience of a city more broadly: how it feels to move through it or fall at its wayside. Cinema has demonstrated a particular capacity to register the frenzy and estrangement characteristic of urban life, profoundly shaping how major cities – Los Angeles, London, and for this context, Leeds – are understood and imagined.

Los Angeles has had one of the most concentrated outputs of on-screen representation in history, fuelled almost uncontrollably by the machine that is Hollywood – the city's "alter-ego"<sup>1</sup>. From the industry's Golden Age, through its 1930s transformation into a backdrop of urban dilapidation, to the emergence of the freeway as a dominant icon from the 1960s onwards, the city has grown into itself in a constant state of self-mythologisation<sup>2</sup>. In recent decades, it has continued oscillating between its own expanding limits: from the dazzling, fashionable worlds of Beverly Hills in romantic comedies like *Clueless* (1995) or *Pretty Woman* (1990), through surreal and unsettling doubles of the same glamorous city in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), to post-apocalyptic horror in *The Terminator* (1984, 1991, 2003) and *Blade Runner* franchises (1982, 2017). These latter films have come to define a vision of LA's inevitable fate which sticks in the collective psyche: that its glittering excess will somehow come to an end in scenes of violence and destruction. As Graham Clarke puts so succinctly, "Los Angeles seems endlessly held between these extremes: of light and dark – of surface and depth"<sup>3</sup>. To engage with any representations of the city as a place is to be accompanied by its possible disturbing futures.

Representations of London, and of Britain more broadly, have likewise swung between polar ends of imagery. The positive end of the spectrum has, at least in recent years, been kept alive almost single-handedly by Richard Curtis, showing us the enchanting London of *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Love Actually* (2003), as well as the countryside idylls of the Cotswolds in *Bridget Jones* (2001) and Cornwall in *About Time* (2013). Yet, as with Los Angeles, some of the most long-lasting cinematic images of Britain's cities have emerged from its darker counterpoint. British cinema has repeatedly returned to depictions of isolation and disillusionment, of working-class heroes navigating precarity and urban decay: a genre broadly recognised as 'kitchen sink realism'. Writing on Mike Leigh's 1993 *Naked*, an archetype of this kind of filmmaking in the 1990s, Mike Mason notes how "busy thoroughfares, familiar architectural landmarks, and other conventional cosmopolitan signifiers, are ignored in favour of deserted streets, obscure alleyways, and an empty office block."<sup>4</sup> Alongside Leigh, filmmakers like Ken Loach and Danny Boyle, or Derek Jarman in his apocalyptic, post-Thatcherite London of *The Last of England* (1987) have shaped a visual language rooted in economic and social division and architectural neglect<sup>5</sup>. This imagery has come to define representations not only of London but also of cities in the North of England – Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester – overlapping in some cases with the British gangster genre, most notably in Mike Hodges' *Get Carter* (1971).

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990) p.18.

<sup>2</sup> Norman M. Klein, 'Inside the Consumer-Built City: Sixty Years of Apocalyptic Imagery' in *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 90s*, ed. by Paul Schimmel (San Diego: MOCA, 1992) p.23.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Clarke, 'The Great Wrong Place: Los Angeles as Urban Milieu' in *The American City*. (Plymouth: Vision Press Ltd, 1988) p.142.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Mason, 'Naked: Social Realism and the Urban Wasteland' in *Cinema and the City*, ed. by Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001) p.244.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

These histories of cinematic city-making form important context for the visual languages of Faith Hughes and Matthew Clifton and their relationships to the city as place. Working in LA and Leeds respectively, both artists catch hold of a throughline that has defined the qualities of these cities on screen, using it to navigate the painted surface. For Hughes, this can be understood through her processes of image-sourcing, pulling and cropping stills directly from Hollywood films, or from online sources like the Prelinger Archives. Selected scenes might not necessarily be in LA, or immediately recognisable as such, but speak to the on-screen language that has developed from the city. An unsettling, but attentively modelled, iconography of faceless figures, disconnected body parts, and shadowy architectures draw together to form a painterly world that is half out of view, as if the camera has panned just away from the action. Applying this imagery to found objects sourced at garage sales and salvage yards in Sun Valley – aluminium heat sinks used for computer cooling systems, ceramic and glass bathroom tiles – Hughes situates the work materially within her local geographies, and in doing so grounds the anonymity of her scenes within a precise, physical language. Further visual material found and repurposed from bizarre Facebook Marketplace listings around Silverlake refines this language as profoundly surreal and staged, a distant but familiar cousin of Hollywood's.

Clifton's image-sourcing is more direct, taking blurry iPhone photos on walks between his home and studio in Leeds. Scenes are closely cropped and transferred to the painted or drawn surface. Again, a sense of place is not defined through explicit geographical reference, but through the pulling together of vignettes that come to feel representative of British cities: desolate fairgrounds, smashed-up police cars, scaffolding, and roundabout islands. A language of anonymous urban life gestures to the social realist cinematic tradition which favours dilapidation over beauty. And yet, overlaid onto this is the use of a bold, sometimes garish colour palette. Skies are tinged in vibrant purples and pinks; graphic symbols of aeroplanes or sailing boats are decontextualised and blown up from sourced signage and cast in energetic hues. Despite a collision with the content of scenes that are otherwise mundane, or even run-down, these colour choices have a cinematic quality which still feels quintessentially British: as if the Pearl & Dean advert has been seared onto the gritty film that follows, or Clifton has chosen his palette from the pick 'n' mix selection.

Addressing both Hughes and Clifton's practices in relation to cinema and to place, what becomes apparent is that both are working on representations of a city's edges and in-betweens. This reflects the experience of living in most major cities, residing not in their iconic centres but in their most unremarkable, anonymous areas. Moments of geographic recognition come to the fore in both oeuvres – like a glimpse of The Shard from a distant street of terraced houses in one of Clifton's London works, or a motel sign at Redondo Beach in Hughes' – but most often not. As Thom Andersen poses in his 2003 video essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, the city has regularly stood in for other cities in movies, playing instead "a city with no name"<sup>6</sup>. Clifton and Hughes seem to be skirting around their own nameless cities, teasing at the idea of a defined place, stripping back any defining features that might comfortably locate the work. Instead, place is articulated through an uncertain, everyday discomfort.

The quotidian typology of both painting practices is, in part, also due to their small, sometimes miniature size, particularly in comparison to the cinema screen. This is not to diminish their impact; if anything, it grants an accessibility to their otherwise enigmatic allure. Rather than magnifying cities like LA or Leeds, as cinema does, these bodies of work do the opposite: the essence of the city is shrunk into a distilled, daily version of itself. Its cinematic self as mythologised place hovers above it as a faint spectre. Hughes and Clifton draw out this doubling, where to occupy a place in a city is to exist alongside what it has been shown to be.

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<sup>6</sup> Thom Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, Video essay transcription, new filmkritik, March 15 2005, <<https://newfilmkritik.de/archiv/2005-03/los-angeles-plays-itself/>>