

frieze

Richard Hughes
The decay of modernity,
melancholy objects and
shared cultural moments
by Alex Farquharson

Left:
Crash My Party You Bastards
2004
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Right:
After the Summer of Like
2005
Re-upholstered sofa, hand-
dyed canvas, wire, modelling
putty, spray paint,
enamel paint, fungi
82x204x89 cm

Her skin is jaundice yellow and her mouth blood-red. Several wet-looking black plaits hang over her face like a mask, or perhaps she's simply too wasted to sweep them away. Her jagged outline seems to stand for a culture's malaise, as Egon Schiele's scratchy drawings of sprawled and angular young bodies once did.

In photographs of *Crash My Party You Bastards* (2004) this image of the girl is fixed, yet when you stand before the installation all you see is a trashed room through an irregular arch-shaped opening in the gallery wall. What you assume to be an eye and its brow, it transpires, is simply a pulverized lampshade clinging to what remains of a broken light fixture. The girl's 'nose', meanwhile, is implied by a serendipitous splash of soup against the room's yellow walls, while the interior of the body of a smashed acoustic guitar serves as the darker shadow beneath her 'nostrils'. It's only when one happens upon the scene from a particular position right of centre that all the objects fall into line and the girl's face appears. It's a dissonant, entropic take on *Face of Mae West* (1935), wherein Salvador Dalí employed his so-called 'paranoiac-critical method' (that old illusionistic trick of rolling two images in one) to produce an image of the 1930s' star from the furnishings of a boho-bourgeois salon (a sofa standing for Mae's lips, a fireplace for her nose, two landscape paintings in place of eyes and so on). *Crash My Party You Bastards* trades Dalí's Hollywood silliness for heroin chic: the girl is distant, beautiful, anaesthetized, gone. Whereas Dalí's portrait is symmetrical, centred and orderly, giving itself away long before viewers have assumed the correct position, Hughes' only momentarily emerges out of chaos as if on account of some dark art. Galleries look

the worse for wear during Hughes' exhibitions. In London's Showroom Gallery's front room a layer of paint had peeled away to reveal a pale greenish hue whose implied putridity made the stomach turn. Entitled *The Shelf-Life of Milk* (2003), it was the gallery itself that was unwell, an impression anticipated by the gallery's sign outside, which for Hughes' exhibition seemed to melt like butter in the sun. The symbolism was unavoidable, the illusion of decay suggesting that the authority of everything the 'white cube' has come to stand for – timelessness, autonomy, neutrality, immateriality – was past its sell-by date. The triumphant symbol of modernity now had the atmosphere of a knackered garage.

But Hughes doesn't need to touch the walls to evoke an image of abandonment and decay; his sculptures, which often represent neglected furniture and other apparently worthless objects that have had contact with bodies, charge the entire space they're in. *Roadsider* (2003) is a facsimile in resin of a plastic bottle that's been pissed in. Placed in a corner, the diminutive object precipitates a narrative of human presence: an otherwise spartan room takes on the sense of having been occupied by someone less than house-trained. More elaborately, *After the Summer of Like* (2005) is a three-seater sofa that Hughes has re-upholstered in dyed canvas (making the sculpture a painting of sorts). The redundant design, which one associates with suburban lounges, together with the faded colours, suggests the sofa has done its time, as if stuck in a kind of limbo wherein images and objects from the recent past are at their most abject and invisible, invested with neither newness nor nostalgia. Now damp, the sofa has sprouted dozens of delicate white mushrooms from its folds and creases, their physiognomy suggesting they are of the 'magic' variety, holding out the promise of an escape route from the clutches of Mum, Dad and siblings.

Hughes is part of a lineage of simulationist sculptors that harks back to the beginnings of Pop (Claes Oldenberg especially) but whose most

emblematic exponent is Robert Gober, an artist who typically focuses on the ubiquitous (news-papers, kitchen and bathroom ware, candles, etc.) the better to maximize the uncanniness of his feats of desublimation. Hughes shares Gober's taste for the everyday, his own repertoire consisting of refuse sacks, sleeping bags, duvets, armchairs, bicycle tyres, matches, bottles and such like, but in his hands these utensils have a specificity Gober intentionally lacks. Rather than retrieving what has been repressed in some universal sense, Hughes evokes the pathos of shared cultural moments once vital to a sense of self and community whose value has subsequently receded. These particular time-space frames may be a student union disco in the early 1990s or else one's first foray into the canon of 1960s' rock, as in the hilarious *Nan's Ode to Street Hassle* (2003), a fabricated red sleeping-bag protruding from a decrepit set of over-sized concrete dentures, evoking, via a bus pass, the Rolling Stones' iconic logo.

Hughes' sculptures take you somewhere you've been before and whose specificity is undeniable. This sense of *déjà vu* is compounded the more the environment of one's formative years resembles the artist's own: the southern hinterland of the West Midlands in the 1980s. Hughes' melancholy and monstrous objects suggest this particular locus: somewhere on a limb, cut adrift from a distinctive metropolitan identity (being neither London nor the North), on the margins (neither urban, rural nor, even, suburban), at a time when social and political idealism was at its lowest ebb (the years of Conservative rule). Hughes' sculptures are trophies to these times, recalling awkward episodes we may not wish to revisit, but which their wit and virtuosity might help us overcome.

