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Light Projects
presents:

<u>**Forms of Deception**</u>
Max Creasy, Stephen Palmer, Clare Rae, Emma White;
curated by Stephen Palmer

10 – 25 September 2011

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In the 2011 blockbuster science-fiction film, *Green Lantern* (dir. Martin Campbell), the title character possesses a 'power ring' that enables him to produce energised constructs, which can take the physical form of any worldly object that he can imagine. As expected, computer generated imagery (CGI) is used to realise the on-screen manifestation of the ring's sparkling hyperreal constructions (which also extend beyond the screen in the 3D version). The storyline here, in which Hal Jordan (aka Green Lantern) makes these fantastic gleaming apparitions appear, doubles the work of the filmmakers, whose task was, similarly, to master the construction of these apparitions and to make them visible. The film is typical of science-fiction cinema in its display of effects: the effects are not in service of a broader entertainment experience, they are the experience. The film is as much 'about' its special-effects as it is 'about' the diegetic worlds that it represents. To an audience, special effects are resolutely visible as a technological construction; this is what makes them 'special effects' and distinguishes them from the rest of the technological apparatus that makes the film possible. The pleasures of the effects in *Green Lantern* are not their realism, their fidelity to the visual world that surrounds us, but the visual properties of the effect itself.

As such, *Green Lantern* harks back to what Michele Pierson has labelled the 'Wonder Years' of CGI in the early 1990s. During these years science fiction cinema revelled in the display of CGI and this was motivated, not by photo-realism, but instead by a techno-futurist aesthetic of '"hyperreal chromism, dazzling luminosity and playful plasticity."[1] The liquid alien form in *The Abyss* (dir. James Cameron, 1989) and the liquid-metal T-1000 robot in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (dir. James Cameron, 1992) both exemplify this aesthetic. Each of these computer generated characters take on forms of the world, but are rendered with such smooth luminosity that their digital construction, rather than their fidelity to the forms they mimic, is the films' main attraction.[2] Inevitably, CGI is often recuperated into the services of realism, reducing such reflexivity. But, as so many DVD special-features and making-of documentaries attest, the pleasure of CGI is not necessarily its seamless insertion into the diegetic space of cinema, but in recognising and appreciating the special effects *as* special effects.

The audience experience of films like *Green Lantern* is one of constant oscillation, moving between immersion in the illusion and recognition of the techniques of construction. Using only the most basic materials, and taking the banal objects of daily life as their subject, the works in *Forms of Deception* distil this experience into singular moments. Each work uniquely captures the pleasures of this liminal space, between absorption and distance, between being caught up in an illusion and recognising its techniques. Max Creasy's images appear to be paintings of a yoghurt container and a highlighter, but on closer inspection it soon becomes clear that these are in fact photographs of hand painted sculptures of these objects. Emma White's video presents a photocopier

in action, but again, the force of the work is found in the moment that we realise, against all expectations, that the video is an animation of a hand-crafted sculpture of a photocopier.

There is something extravagant about the 'deceptions' that we are presented with here. From simple objects and gestures an elaborate image is produced. The photocopier offers a mechanised and instantaneous power of reproducibility; by contrast White's copy of the photocopier is a labour-intensive and time-consuming process that can only produce an approximation of the object on which it was modelled. In this context the term 'copy' does not quite seem adequate. It takes a moment to recognise the techniques of construction in Creasy's and White's work, but it is not hidden; the seamlessness of the illusion is clearly not the aim. Writing of money, Jacques Derrida has noted that a counterfeit coin can only be counterfeit if it is accepted as true money. If a counterfeit coin is recognised as a counterfeit, then it is no longer counterfeit, it is simply not money.[3] Once the technique of their production is recognised, these images are no longer counterfeits, no longer copies of other forms of representation, but something else entirely. It is this moment of recognition that makes this work so captivating, it transfers the work from the economy of the copy, or the realm of simulacra, into something else, something that is no longer captured by the economy but is in excess to it: a special effect that cannot be simply subsumed by the discourse of mimesis.

On first glance Stephen Palmer's image is a photograph of a shadow of a statue in a park, but as with Creasy's and White's work there is something uncanny here: it is both familiar and unfamiliar. Of course, it only takes a moment to recognise the absence of the statue that would be casting this shadow. A closer look and the special effect is revealed: it is not a shadow at all, but a painting of a shadow applied directly to the grass of the park, and then photographed. Plato, in his well-known analogy of the cave, argues that the shadow, a reproduction, is a degraded vision, the lowest form of vision. For Plato, only when things are seen under the light of the sun do we step closer to the ultimate goal of seeing the thing itself in its true and ideal form. And even this vision, under the plenitude of the sun, is still one step away from the ultimate vision, which would abandon the problems of the sensible entirely in pursuit of the purely intelligible: the mind's eye that can contemplate and understand the ultimate truth in the "form of the good". Once this vision is attained, Plato suggests, one can look with sympathy at those who remain in ignorance.[4] In clear opposition to this idea, Palmer's work instead embraces the shadow, and to this adds further layers of reproduction, completely discarding the thing itself. The work celebrates the provisional quality of the shadow/reproduction, against the permanence and idealism of the heroic statuesque form to which it alludes. As with the other works, this image revels in the *process* of the copy, the form of the 'deception' rather than its fidelity to an absent real. Accepting the impossibility of ideal forms pure from reproductions that would degrade them, Palmer's image celebrates the inevitable contingency and instability of representation.

In revealing itself as a sculptural model of a photocopier, White's work also reveals its basis as a product of stop-motion animation: an illusion of movement constructed through assembling still images. Of course, most recorded moving images are based on the succession of individual still frames. In animation, however, the process is accentuated through the purposeful construction of each frame, the labour of animation. Clare Rae's image reverses this process: its effect is not based on the assemblage of stills, but on the extraction of a singular instant from a durational gesture. Capturing an image of herself in midair, this moment appears plucked from a sequence and defers us away from this instant and towards the sequence of which it is a part and which might reveal its circumstances. The work hints at a narrative, but the future and past of the gesture remain oblique, unknowable. Leaving the viewer to ponder this absent narrative, Rae's image emphasises the artifice, not just of the content of the

image, but of photography as a medium and its imposition of stillness. In the context of this exhibition, Rae's work reactivates our awareness of photography as itself a special effect, an effect naturalised over the long history of the medium. As with the other works in the exhibition, Rae's work embraces this special effect, celebrating its forms of deception and the unique experience this offers us: as we both succumb to, and yet are also completely aware of, the seduction of the illusion.

Kyle Weise.

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[1] Michele Pierson, "CGI Effects in Hollywood Science-Fiction Cinema 1989-1995: The Wonder Years." Screen 40.2 (1999): 158-176. The pre-history of such films (and of this type of theoretical understanding of them) can be found in the oft-cited writing of Tom Gunning and his essay "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Specatator and the Avant-Garde." Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative. Ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker. London: BFI, 1990. 56-62.

[2] The storyline of *Terminator 2* allegorises this shift to the digital in special effects as the computer-generated T-1000 battles against the mechanical props and physical prosthetics that, together with Arnold Schwarzenegger's performance, produces the on-screen T-800 robot. This is typical of the way that science fiction cinema is in some ways 'about' the technologies of its production. The writing of Brooks Landon explores this idea in detail. See: The Aesthetics of Ambivalence: Rethinking Science Fiction Film in the Age of Electronic (Re)Production. Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy 52. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1992.

[3] Jacques Derrida. Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. 1992. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. p.84, 87.

[4] Plato. The Republic. Trans. Desmond Lee. 2nd ed. (revised). London: Penguin, 1987. p.247-61.