

## FANTOPIA – A state of impossible perfection. Or, how to live with perfect people (and not kill them)

Ian Burns, Ruth Claxton, Aleana Egan, Rodney Graham, Locky Morris, Mairead O'Heocha, Francesco Simeati, Boyd Webb

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### Imperfect Present

*Fantopia* is a strange but alluring reality. If we close our eyes, we are far from the city – birdsong, sheep and bees can be heard if we listen closely. Bottles clink and music drifts into earshot, like a song carried through the wind from a radio in the distance. When we open our eyes it slowly becomes clear that something is out of kilter, and that real life has followed us into this imaginary place, the hope of paradise inevitably thwarted.

This doomed notion of utopia – our perpetual desire to find it and the ultimate impossibility of its existence, is at the heart of *Fantopia*. Whilst some of the works within the exhibition show a witty resignation to this duality, others take a more pragmatic approach, tempering expectations and seeing hope in smaller gestures. The dream of returning to nature and the conflicting desires of the rural and urban life are explored, other works facing head-on the conflicts that make the utopian dream impossible. We live in a new 'age of anxiety'. A decade of war, neo-con politics, post-9/11 trauma and the threat of global warming have overshadowed our dream of utopia and left us weary. The New World, once at the heart of utopian imaginings, no longer fulfils its promise, our expectations now seem unrealistic, our hope in America tarnished. Throughout *Fantopia* America recurs like a leitmotif, from ideas of landscape and cityscape to the Stars and Stripes - a shorthand for the promise of paradise and its inevitable failure.

Rodney Graham's short film *A little thought* could be seen as an entry point into the construct of *Fantopia*, setting a tone that is poetic and dryly humorous. *A Little Thought* says much about the difficulties of representing and re-creating our experience of nature. Blossom is seen in close up, ducks and swans glimpsed in fuzzily focussed interludes, nature reduced to clichéd representations that seem so familiar that they could almost be anywhere. The country-style ballad that Graham sings sounds equally familiar, but just as you are lulled into expecting a story about love and heartbreak, Graham turns the genre upside down singing about the complexities of relationships and being driven "halfway around the bend". Graham's piece is not only a humorous acknowledgement of human imperfections, but a dream of an idealised future. The monotony of suburbia contrasts with the lure of the open road and to fantasies of life as a rock star, suggested by scenes of an electric guitar being caressed with what may be the feathers of the aforementioned duck.

Similarly in Mairead O'Heocha's *Annamoe Antiques* the semi-rural and the lure of a future imagined paradise collide. The painting depicts a kind of no man's land where the rural and urban meet, caught on a typically Irish grey day and glimpsed from the side of the road. Paradise found it is not – nature is tamed and ordered, the streets devoid of human presence, suggestive of a place where nothing happens. The universal dream of escaping to the country seems to have come up empty. We are left to look instead at a solitary mannequin swathed in the Stars and Stripes, its colours luminous in comparison to the muted tones of the environment. Within this imperfect present lies the temptation of a more exciting future; the flag, a symbol not only of America, but the dream of utopia itself.

In Ian Burns' *Making an Image (to 1/1000<sup>th</sup> scale)* Olafur Eliasson's man-made waterfall shimmers beneath the Brooklyn Bridge like a Shangri La. Burns' recreation is a convoluted assemblage consisting of live feed video, cut outs, sticky tape and the type of animated picture that you might see in a Chinese restaurant. The mechanics behind the illusion are laid bare, as were Eliasson's – from the visible scaffolding to the pipes and pumps that pulled water from the East River and out again. In both pieces, there is the paradox of knowing you are being tricked but allowing your disbelief to be suspended anyway. Burns' image looks out from the Brooklyn side of the river onto the cityscape of Manhattan to a view that would have previously included the Twin Towers. Once their absence is noted, the scene takes on new and paradoxical meanings, Eliasson's attempt at a moment of sublimity co-existing alongside painful memories of 9/11.

Further inside *Fantopia* a giant brown bear stands on its hind legs as if in a display of strength before attacking. Unbeknownst to the bear the game is up before it began, a large target marking its chest,

unwittingly asking us to take a pot shot. Francesco Simeti's *Woodenly*, with its simulated branches and densely patterned wallpaper, appears at first to be like a plastic paradise. His wallpaper, populated by deer seems absurdly beautiful until you realise that he's reduced them to sitting targets, the marks on their bodies mimicking cuts of venison. The dream of paradise is inexorably shattered and beneath the decorativeness of his work lies an impending bloodbath. *Woodenly* could be viewed as a parody of American gun culture, but it also says much about the manipulation and aesthetisation of violent images by the mass media and mankind's inherently destructive nature.

Ruth Claxton's birds perch high on twisted metallic nests, their faces obliterated by ornamentation. Her intricately detailed sculptures depict a skewed paradise that is no longer organic but carved and welded out of shards of steel. Her porcelain figurines are at once beautiful and unsettling, mutants prettified by multicoloured and sparkling clay. They sit passively, blind to our gaze and far removed from their beginnings as sanitised versions of nature fit for the mantelpiece. We too are reflected in Claxton's mirrored hoops suggesting our own dislocation from our origins and reality itself.

Aleana Egan's steel structure, may be the only work in *Fantopia* that is an abstract and pure form, but it is one that is not free from the associations that we might project on it – from one view the structure takes on the look of a house, stripped down to a simple outline mirroring the architectural forms in Mairead O'Heocha's painting and the gallery itself; from another it becomes a geometric landscape, the sweep of its steel curves reiterating those of Ruth Claxton's nests. Egan's work often reflects observations made of her environment and in particular her childhood home of Dún Laoghaire. In *Haigh Terrace* Egan creates not only a physical representation of a place or building, but a re-imagining of the past in the present. In this re-imagining the past is streamlined and made perfect, an idealised memory of home projected into an imperfect present.

A TV screen elsewhere displays an empty field, a typically English farming scene, with hedgerows, grass and the sound of sheep bleating nearby. It's a normality that is quickly turned on its head as Boyd Webb's protagonists – a large pantomime Horse and wolf-like Dog, emerge over the horizon. Strangely, we find that we are looking at humans who are dressed up as animals who are in a landscape that is cultivated by man for animals. Whilst Webb's characters struggle with the obstacles he places in front of them - be it Dog's difficulty in unfolding the map or Horse's inability to contribute to putting up the tent – his film could be seen to be a metaphor for larger questions about humanity and our relationship to nature. *Horse and Dog* not only wittily explores and questions our dominance over nature but, like many works in *Fantopia*, our ultimate distance from it. Nature may appear to be controlled and tamed, but just as Horse and Dog are at the mercy of an unexpected swarm of bees, so we too are vulnerable in the face of what nature might throw at us. After Horse and Dog disrobe in their tent, their human selves silhouetted by the light of a lamp, and after we've stopped laughing at the absurdity of Webb's scenario, we're left thinking about more worrying things – things beyond our control that we'd rather put to the back of our mind such as current ecological concerns and our fragile hold as the dominant species.

In *Home Entertainment* Locky Morris focuses on common every day routines and objects as a metaphor for bigger global issues. His recording of clinking bottles on their way to be recycled triggers sound activated disco lights, creating a display of light and colour on the wall before them. The objects used– a CD player and the type of lights that were the mainstay of 1980's school discos - say much about our consumption of stuff; the once coveted CD player and lights already outdated by newer, flashier technologies, now headed for the rubbish dump. It's a piece that succinctly mirrors our daily relationship to environmental concerns. We may diligently separate our plastics from our papers, but for every small dent we make to the landfill we pile on more. With *Home Entertainment* Morris seems to be saying that small gestures are better than nothing, his lights flickering like a mini aurora borealis – a small expression of hope made purely from light and colour.