

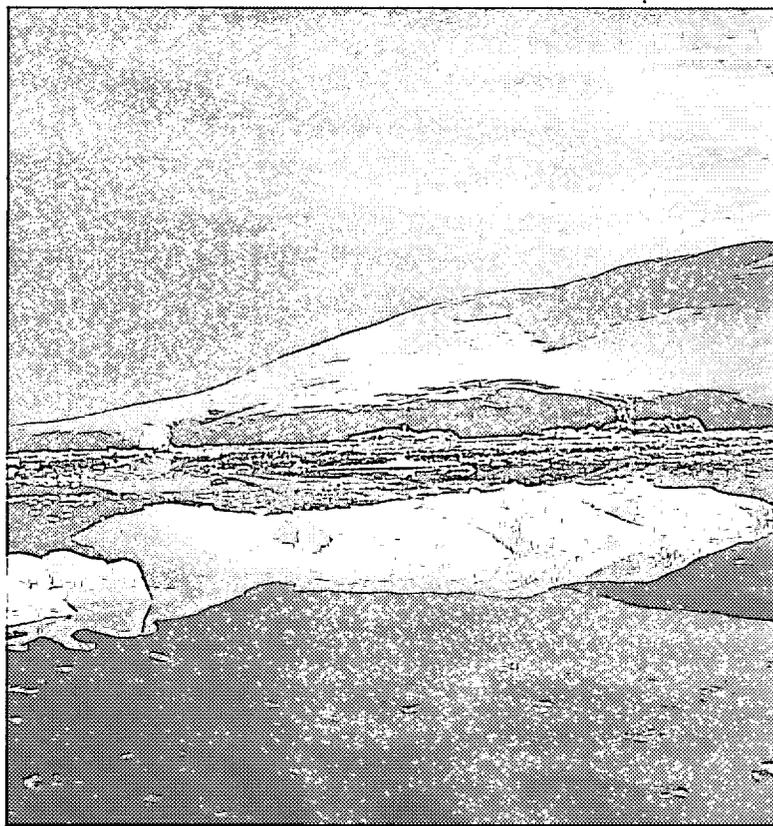
roll-down world map. Chalked onto the board is a 6 x 24 grid, with the title 'Wheel of fortune: curious deaths of some Burmese kings'. An oblong shape is repeated across the diagram – the stop-motion flight of a tossed coin, perhaps? Eight of the shapes are labelled with a date, a king and his fate. The first label reads '931AD, Theinko, Killed by a farmer whose cucumbers he ate without permission'; the final label, '1559, Nandabayin, Laughed to death when informed, by a visiting Italian merchant, that Venice was a free state without a king'. The others are equally bizarre, and often involve live-stock. Usually elephants.

Patterson's pedagogical presentation suggests that this information is 1, true; and 2, important. In a time of data overload, information squabbles for validity and design is a key, if spurious, bestower of authority. This is the premise of the exhibition, and something that Patterson continually plays with in his work. Yet his practice is also much more than this, because the information that he digs up is so mysterious, and the visual codes that he interleaves are so sophisticated.

A much simpler work is Paul O'Neill's *Promise*, a circle of white text on a black wall. The text is written in a heavy gothic script that makes reading difficult, especially when the spaces between the words have been squeezed out. It says 'todayisthetomorrowyouwere-promisedyesterday' – a fine T-shirt slogan or album title. But the words themselves are secondary, the real point being the black-hearted circularity of the enterprise, something that also marks O'Neill's other work, *no*. This is a neon 'no vacancies' sign dumped on its end in the corner of a corridor. The 'no' continually flashes on and off. Is there a vacancy or not? Is there even a hotel? Well, yes there is, in *Düsseldorf*. This is the title of Giles Round's sign, which is made up of black wooden cubes and says 'HOTEL' on its four vertical sides. In this case the text is actually important... the text of the title that is; 'Düsseldorf' shifts the work from a formalist proposition to a personal narrative, as if the sign is taken from memory. This tactic crops up again in Round's other work, *Someday* (for Penny Jo). Here the word 'SOMEDAY' sits on the floor in front of an angle-poise lamp. The word is spelled out in raw MDF, with a string of rope lights running through its interior. Coloured acetate on its back gives a faint multicoloured halo behind, while the text spills a dramatic shadow to the front. 'HOPELESS ENDS AND ENDLESS HOPES' is written in large, scruffy brushwork on the backdrop wall.

Both of Round's works are whimsical and private. But these twee qualities are married to cinematic visual effects and intriguing construction. As a pair, they leave you wanting more. And wanting more is how a show like this should leave you. While the exhibition's stated aims are remarkably precise and not especially novel, the curator, Richard Priestley, has brought together a range of works that head off in their own directions. In reeling in a major new work by a former Turner Prize nominee and unearthing a couple of gems from a recent graduate, Priestley has managed to put together exactly the kind of playful exhibition that you would hope to find in a project space funded by an East End studio block. ■

David Barrett is a London-based artist and writer.



■ Darren Almond

White Cube London April 25 to May 31

Darren Almond
until MMXLI.VIII 2000

Darren Almond's new show at White Cube appears to have the insanely grand ambition of gauging the dimensions of the Earth's poles. It wants to be more than landscape art: it wants to be a full cartographic survey. But like a confident surveyor with years behind him, even when he is facing the task of his life Almond trusts the usual tools in his kit-box: films, to capture the spatial dimensions of each pole; monitors, to chart the earth's electro-magnetic energy, relayed directly from a station on the south pole and a glossy black pneumatic clock which bisects the gallery like a tombstone, separating the films at either end.

'11 miles.....from Safety' (the title derived, with some ungainly Hollywood phrasing, from Captain Scott's distance from home when he perished) seems so much a question of measurements and readings because any representation of the poles necessarily gets entangled in cartography. The climate is so exotic, rapidly changeable and inhuman that to depict it is in some way to tame it, to impose on it the yardstick of humanity. One might then judge the show's success on the accuracy – or rather, the adequacy – of Almond's readings, though that seems complicated by the fact that so much of his work has already involved journeying and measuring – all the readings appear part of a larger design. As he has said of his earlier endeavours, 'The films go easterly and [the] sculpture goes west and the photo pieces have tended to go north and south.' (This new project may flout those rules, but it does actually derive from journeys which he initially embarked on in search of more of his 'Full Moon' photographs.)

If we do take the yardstick of accuracy as the measure of quality, notwithstanding the problems, the success of the show is mixed. His film of the Antarctic, however, comes very close to capturing some truths. A landscape of the ice cap shot from a passing boat, it is

projected upside down. Panning slowly up from the hull of the boat the screen fills first with cloudy shards of crumbled berg floating by in a tar-black sea. Then, as the camera settles on a horizon line somewhere near the bottom of the picture, the light begins to glance off the water creating a pale, shimmering foil across which new bergs appear of now crushing proportions. The quiet waters and the crystalline light spring perfect shadowy doubles from them, while in the distance a landscape of rock and snow forms a slower-moving backdrop, itself also shadowed into the water.

Scrambling for some metaphorical landmarks in all this gorgeous watery abstraction, and looking towards the landmass in the distance, I thought first of melting blocks of ice cream; but then a massive berg would fly by (apparently flying by virtue of the film's inversion) and look everything like the craggy bulk of an Imperial Star Destroyer from the *Star Wars* series. Perhaps that was just my enthusiasm running away with me, but the fact that at times the film resembles animation is, peculiarly, a measure of how fine it is: it reframes the beautiful but unearthly tundra as beautiful and perfect unreality.

If the success of Almond's version of the Antarctic lies in its evasion of the regular tropes, then the flaw of his film of the Arctic, with its image of a man pulling a sledge through the darkness, is its nostalgic redolence of Edwardian toffs struggling against the limits of their earthly estate. In reading the Arctic in this way he is also picking up a different optic from that used at the south pole; the presence of the clock and the monitors relaying electro-magnetic readings only multiply those optics. Almond wants all these perspectives to converge in one experience what would bring the poles closer, but instead he has created a conceptual chart of different abstractions – visual, temporal, physical – and they don't easily gel.

Stephen J Pyne suggested in his excellent book *The Ice* that the Antarctic erases all normal expectations of landscape – that it can hardly be experienced as a landscape at all. Only a culture accustomed to it could possibly possess adequate means of representing it. That Almond should succeed in his own attempts when he evokes the fantastical and produces a negation, and stumble when he evokes a human reality, is as much due to the shortcomings of our own conceptual kit-box as it is of his. ■

Morgan Falconer is a freelance journalist.

■ Marine Hugonnier

MW projects London April 4 to May 31

Chisenhale Gallery London April 9 to May 18

Under the Taliban it was against Afghan law to import any of the following: lipstick, chessboards, musical instruments, satellite dishes, cassette tapes, computers, videos, television sets, playing cards and all games. Also

banned were films, filming equipment, and any object bearing the image of a living thing, human or animal. In this light, any film currently made in Afghanistan and filmed by a western, female artist no less, is of note – if only to confirm that some degree of freedom might actually have trickled into the country.

In late summer 2002, French-born London-based artist Marine Hugonnier visited Afghanistan with the aim of creating a film, *Ariana*, exploring the connection between history and landscape. Afghanistan is celebrated for the utter uniqueness and beauty of its geography. Forming a kind of a natural fortress, two thirds of the country is covered by steep mountainous terrain, with the Hindu Kush mountain range – the location for *Ariana* – in its centre, an almost impenetrable barrier between the north and the rest of the country. These forbidding mountains are so inhospitable that, as the artist explains, they have never even been individually named. In one of the photographic elements connected with *Ariana* the artist has shot some of these nameless mountains – bestowing upon them, through photography, the dignity of individuality.

Separating these immense peaks are deep, fertile valleys which, in contrast to the hostile surrounding mountains, were described by a 15th-century poet as a lush earthly paradise, 'a land of emeralds'. Southern Afghanistan is dominated by desert; to the north are the farmlands. Twenty-three years of war, deforestation, floods, avalanches and the drug trade have taken their toll on the paradise that was Afghanistan, devastated further by the more than ten million land mines still undiscovered there.

It is against this backdrop that Hugonnier departs on her journey from Kabul to the Pandjshêr Valley, a state within a state which, given its defensively strategic position, resisted invasion by both communism and fundamentalism. The crew's aim is to film the surrounding Hindu Kush mountains from a 360° panoramic point of view, but this soon proves impossible. Observation equals control, as we learned from Michel Foucault, and the local authorities are hardly going to hand such power over to the 34-year-old artist. *Ariana* is punctuated by black-outs and silences suggesting the waiting, the frustration of the filmmakers' experience. Meanwhile the images range from children swimming in clean waters, to crumbling buildings, to the sporadic red flashes of light in mountain night-bombings. When the crew is finally allowed to film the city from the overlooking 'television hill', their discomfort at holding this dominating position leads them to ignore the panoramic sight and turn their lens, briefly, to their accompanying soldier. They quickly abandon filming altogether however, and *Ariana* ends abruptly here.

In the past Hugonnier has worked with ideas that are noticeably representative of topical notions occupying contemporary art at present. In *Flowers*, 1996-2000, the artist handpainted real flowers, enhancing their natural colour. In this simple operation the artist drew attention to the artificiality of nature, as well as to the history of

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