Convertibles, 1984, holds a pair of pristine vacuum cleaners in a state of suspended animation, like lab-grown lungs, always new and ready for a life that is never breathed into them.

There are getting on for a hundred works in the show and, although the artists are mostly men, they aren't all old Americans. Adam McEwen has dragged a 747 undercarriage into the gallery, its four wheels initially suggesting a strange car but ultimately speaking of the shocking difference between industrial and human scale. Damien Hirst gets very specific about air crashes by presenting a pathologist's matter-of-fact study of a dead pilot, which leaves viewers in no doubt about the massive energies involved in mechanical flight and the softness of our bodies when exposed to this energy in an uncontrolled way. Jenny Saville's characteristically virtuoso portrait of a battered corpse, *Witness*, 2009, is counterpointed by one of Cindy Sherman's unnerving doll set-ups from the early 1990s. Cady Noland's *Clip On Man*, 1989, reminds us that we don't see enough of her precisely calibrated cynicism, while Richard Hamilton's familiar, abstracted car relief, *Hers is a Lush Situation*, 1958, looks fresh and remarkably prescient here.

Roger Hiorns's scattering of glass contact lenses, several of which have been crunched under visitors' feet, is a subtle inclusion, unlike his crystal-encrusted engines that dangle from a steel frame, which seem rather obvious in this context. Such clunky thematising is evident in a number of inclusions. For example, Glenn Brown's *The Pornography of Death (Painting for Ian Curtis) After Chris Foss*, 1995, was perhaps chosen for its title and sci-fi imagery when one of his sickly portraits would have been more effective. But there are worse examples: a Hirst photopainting of a car covered in a suicide bomber's blood, Roy Lichtenstein's explosion sculpture, Prince's bloodied nurse painting, John Currin's porn painting, Rachel Whiteread's prints of collapsing tower blocks. You get the idea: if they depict sex or violence or cars or destruction they must be Ballardian. Evidently, the curators felt the need to keep visiting Gagosian's storeroom, even though this caused a small, incisive exhibition to bloat a little, highlighting a difficulty faced by commercial-gallery curators: in museums, borrowing works is expensive so curators are reductive in their editing, whereas the pressure in a commercial gallery is to show more work from the gallery's holdings.

It's funny how you can wait ages for a commercial gallery to put on a sprawling exhibition about perversion and then all of a sudden two come along at once. Over at Vegas on Vyner Street, Keith Coventry has gathered a 66-artist exhibition, 'Peeping Tom', which takes as its premise the idea that the term's 17th-century definition – 'a curious prying fellow' – could equally apply to artists. The show aims to be 'a spectacle for the scopophiliac', treating the artist as an agent for transgression. Again, this is a show that needs editing, but there are gems to be found. For example, there is something unpleasantly right about Keith Tyson's pairing of an inverted underwater photo of a woman at a swimming pool, her head apparently missing as it breaks the surface, and a fly-covered dead dog swelling up on a roadside; the images have a subtle, awful symmetry but without any hint of contrivance, and they set off an unreachable itch of connections deep in the subconscious. At the other end of the spectrum, Pippa Koszerek's text describing an office meeting in which a secretarial temp arrives late and flustered, the eyes of the room on her as she fails in her single duty, is painfully well observed. Such knowing humour is at work in several of the pieces, including Jamie Shovlin's portraits of horror-film murder victims, each captioned with a summary of their absurdly sticky ends. There are sticky ends aplenty in the show, but it is the works that are only mildly pervy, which don't go out of their way to shock, that suit the fetid, panty-sniffing ethos of the project, such as Mat Collishaw's pathetic little film from an up-skirt shoe camera. This piece complements the work of his generational fellow, Tracey Emin, whose melancholic video of the artist on horseback on a beach – her expression half cocky, half sultry – sits perfectly in the exhibition's fug of unfulfilled desire.

These two shows tell a tale of East End and West End desires. Gagosian, in its vast, architected gallery with luxury apartments above, brings us an exhibition that revels in expensive perfection and even more expensive perversions – and a pleasure in being watched. Vegas, in its warehouse overlooking an abandoned cargo boat on a dank canal, gives us the titillation of a voyeuristic peek at the unobtainable, leaving only self-pleasure. How the two need each other. ▮

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Keith Tyson
Forced Narrative 1: 'Witchtrials and Omens' 1997

John Smith: Solo Show

Royal College of Art London 19 March to 13 April

How interesting can a toilet window be? If you share John Smith's fascination with architecture and sleight of hand in the editing suite, it can be scintillating. *Double Shutter*, 2010 – a new formulation of two old film works from 1978-79, one featuring a desktop fan in front of a garden window, the other a small window of obscured glass with a ventilation fan – ratchets through formal permutations that bring to mind archaic messaging techniques. In both films, the windows wink in and out of day and night modes, between blackly obscured and transparent; the warm glow of the bathroom or the verdant hedge beyond flash in and out of existence. Both fans, at their varying speeds of rotation, seem to generate confusion as to how these images are constructed and the logic behind the series of offs and ons. Eventually, the toilet window film partially reveals its mechanism: a hand holding a black rectangle of card artificially brings on the night in a structuralist reference to the camera shutter. Here Smith adheres to the conjurer's principle of revealing part of the trick so as to absorb the audience at a deeper level of optical collusion.

Smith has come to exemplify the crossroads between formalist and representational filmmaking. Written commentary has made much of his position at the margins of structuralist filmmaking, which, in the 1970s, was intolerant of such 'mainstream' indulgences as narrative content. So this huge survey,

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John Smith
Hotel Diaries 2001-07

the final degree show of the Royal College's MA Curating Contemporary Art course, marks a conclusive embrace of his virtuoso hybridisation of previously distinct, ideological stances.

The show comprises timed and looped screenings on monitors and projectors, both digital and 16mm. It spans from Smith's first film, *Triangles*, 1972 – a piece of classic geometric jazz incongruously interrupted by footage of a boy pulling a sticking plaster off his knee – to his latest video *Flag Mountain (Southern Nicosia, looking towards the border with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus)*, 2010. The contrast in titles tells us much about Smith's trajectory, if we were to be so reductive with his 40-year career: he has become more overtly political and more straightforwardly descriptive in recent video work. He has been criticised in the past on the handling of his transition from film to video but, while it is certainly the case that *Flag Mountain* is less complex in structure, it retains a formalist accent, as the vast Turkish flag, which lights up at night, is animated into a disco bling of territorial aggression.

It is important that *Flag Mountain* is seen in close proximity to *Double Shutter*, making explicit the formal concerns and structuralist gags in later works, which might otherwise be perceived as uninflected didacticism. In fact Smith's political messaging reaches way back, albeit in more covert guises. In two of the three episodes of *Home Suite*, 1993-94, Smith relates, off-camera, anecdotes pertaining to a hilariously shabby house. The state of disrepair stretches our credulity to the limit at times, and the narrative, too, passes in and out of credibility: stories of electrical devices set off by the depression of the toilet seat, baroque artex in the bathroom and of Smith, prone on the now dilapidated stairs, begging a girlfriend to stay. In the third episode we leave the house and find ourselves slap-bang in the middle of the M11 link road demolition protests. We learn that Smith's house is in such a state because he has ripped out its fireplaces, chimneys and a mosaic floor before it, too, is torn down. This final episode, as Smith walks to his new flat, dazed by the traumatic scene around him, necessarily dispels the tender eccentricities of the former episodes; but this is where divergent expectations of delicacy and immediacy struggle to coalesce comfortably.

Smith's uncertain housing situation continued until his early 40s and it is this that has fuelled his longstanding fixation with architecture. Buildings aid and abet formal and fictional constructions throughout: a London high street colludes in the peerless *Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, where Smith's voiceover appears to direct the casual scene before us; the tower blocks jig in *Hackney Marshes – November 4th 1997*, 1997; a water tower powers the strange fiction of *The Black Tower*, 1985-87; and the interiors of hotel rooms gradually release socio-political pasts and presents in *Hotel Diaries*, 2001-07.

While *Hotel Diaries* is an ethically conscious series of journal-like ruminations on the travesties of humanity, it is not devoid of Smith's levity that can, at times, border brilliantly on the puerile. Smith likes a pun. The early film *Associations*, 1975, is presented at the beginning of the show as an indicator of the wordplay that worms throughout. Magazine images flash up to accompany a text on the linguistic theory of word association. The word 'association', for example, is made up of images of an ass, a sewing machine, the sea and an Asian woman looking directly at the camera. It is both dazzling and groan-inducing, these 'clang' responses, as they are called in the trade, recurring with increasing density, like a peaking neurosis. There are spectacular wordplays elsewhere too: the German for cheese and sausage, *kase* and *wurst*, become fodder for *The Worst Case Scenario*, 2001-03, although I'll not spoil the magnificent revelation at the end of *Museum Piece (Hotel Diaries 2)*, 2004.

It makes perfect sense for Smith to adopt such an approach to linguistics, switching focus between what a word means and what it sounds like, just as he shuttles between structure and representation. In *The Kiss*, 1999, a collaboration with Ian Bourn, the surface of the image shatters as the lily we have been watching grows and eventually breaks a hitherto invisible glass plate. It is a dramatisation of the moment when we realise that all we utter and all we see is constructed, conditional and malleable. And this, ultimately, is the pivot on which Smith's films turn. ▮

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Ian Breakwell

QUAD Derby 13 February to 18 April

Waiting to leave the train at Derby, on the way to see Ian Breakwell's exhibition, I peered over the shoulder of a seated nun to discover that she was reading the problems page of *Woman's Own*. This was a Breakwell moment, like one of the aberrant entries from his *Continuous Diary*. It brought to mind the surrealists' anti-clericalism, and the predilection for nuns of pornographers and popular comedians – all cultural frames of reference employed by Breakwell.

This exhibition, in Breakwell's home town, is the first retrospective survey of the artist's work since his death in 2005. The exhibition's enigmatic name, 'The Elusive State of Happiness',

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