



Title

Horror in the Modernist Block

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Cover image: **Fig. 4** Still from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by Ho Tzu Nyen. 2011. HD video, duration 28 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).

Horror in the Modernist Block

by Anneka French • 25.01.2023

In the gallery foyer a torn and grubby football perches on top of a rusty lamp post like a head on a spike. With hexagons of polyester pressed in to form mournful eyes and pulled out for a lolling tongue, *If Socks Aren't Pulled Up Heads Will Roll* **FIG.1** by Richard Hughes (b.1974) introduces an exhibition that aims to explore emotional and psychological reactions to urban space, particularly modernist architecture. On the first floor is another large sculpture by Hughes, *Lithobolia Happy Meal* **FIG.2**, which, suspended from the ceiling, echoes the form of a children's nursery mobile, replete with chicken-nugget-shaped boulders and a pale aqua space hopper. It is a sculpture redolent with 1970s and 1980s nostalgia, made monstrous by dint of scale, context and subtle movement. Hughes's work is by far the most playful in *Horror in the Modernist Block* at Ikon, Birmingham, as the exhibition is less concerned with the horror genre as it pertains to film or literature than the actualities of real-life horror stories. The exhibition has no doubt been affected by the stark surrealism of the pandemic, empty urban streets and multiple domestic lockdowns, but other recent news and events radically shape the reception of specific works.

A wall-mounted *Exit Sign* **FIG.3** by Abbas Zahedi (b.1984) mimics the visual language of the ubiquitous green and white signs found in offices, medical facilities and public buildings across the United Kingdom. In Zahedi's version, positioned at the exit of the first floor galleries, the two running figures are inverted, pointing downwards to the doorway and ground level of the building, as well as to five attached steel chains that reference Islamic mourning rituals. If this were not unsettling enough, the London-based artist explicitly states that the work was made in response to the Grenfell Tower fire of 2017 in which seventy-two were killed, an event that is indelibly imprinted in our collective memory and the impact of which is still unfolding.¹ This context adds a significant level of poignancy, and indeed of horror, to the sculpture. Zahedi's work directly criticises the sociopolitical circumstances that led to the disaster over and above the inadequate safety procedures relating to the high-rise building itself.



Fig. 1 *If Socks Aren't Pulled Up Heads Will Roll*, by Richard Hughes. 2009. Glass reinforced polyester, iron powder, polyurethane and acrylic, 301 by 62.5 by 28 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Stuart Whipps; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).

The video installation *The Cloud of Unknowing* **FIG.4** by Ho Tzu Nyen (b.1976) was originally commissioned for the Singapore Pavilion of the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. Here it is presented in Ikon's 'film zone', where four video works are shown on separate screens linked by timers, affording each the time and space it requires. The act of breathing – which has been foregrounded in light of COVID-19 and referenced in multiple exhibitions of late in relation to healthcare and housing – is significant in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which micro-narratives introduce eight characters living in

separate apartments in a Singapore block scheduled for demolition.² Described as the imagined 'ghosts' of residents living in the real-life block, these characters enact a series of ordinary behaviours that become increasingly strange as the building and its sensory phenomena take over. A character drums as water pours down on him; food rots; another apartment is taken over by plants; and a man trying to sleep literally sinks into his mattress as his room fills with the titular 'cloud'. Ho's film is intense and unsettling. In truth the 'cloud' is far more like smoke, something that seems uncomfortably real in such close proximity to Zahedi's *Exit Sign*. This is compounded by the smoke machine hidden behind the film's projection screen that begins to churn out dry ice at the climax of Ho's film, drawing upon the theatricality of horror presentations and engulfing exhibition visitors.

Away from the smoke, a photograph by Karim Kal (b.1977) titled *Sol 2, Noisy-le-sec* (2021) features a related horror trope: a creeping ooze. An amorphous puddle on the floor is set against a dense black background. A closer look reveals it to be tree debris after rain, specked with cigarette butts. It is an abstracted street view, made eerie by the artist's choice of context, form, lighting and the gaps left to be filled by the imagination of the viewer. Two other photographs, *Entourage 7, Rillieux-la-pape* (2017) and *Entourage 1, la Guillotière/Lyon* **FIG.5** feature more recognisable modernist elements: the underpasses at the base of concrete tower blocks commonly found in France, which are spaces of transgression, freedom and function. In each of the three photographs, Kal's strong camera flash illuminates the foreground of each scene, an effect that the artist connects to documentary photography and its disclosure of only the foremost aspect of a subject.³ Kal, who is half-Algerian, focuses on urbanism and migration, placing issues of poverty, racism, urban control and associated discrimination front and centre and advocating for possibility, sensitivity and respect.



Fig. 2 *Lithobolia Happy Meal*, by Richard Hughes. 2022. Cast polyester resin and fibreglass, steel rod, acrylic and enamel paint and trampoline parts, 540 by 300 by 254 cm. (Courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow; photograph Stuart Whipps; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).

Also on view in the film zone is a new commission by NT titled *BRUTAL* **FIG.6**, which is set within an inner-city housing estate in Birmingham, and like Kal's work, focuses on perception and presumption. The lighting and soundtrack transform the real-life tower blocks into imaginary places of menace. NT deliberately builds suspense with a narrative that is never materialised, portraying such buildings as sites of fear and spectacle, thereby drawing attention to the psychological and voyeuristic mechanisms of horror and crime genres. If there is any reading of the exhibition as a criticism of Birmingham, a city that is (in)famously shaped by its post-war architecture and infrastructure, works by a range of artists born or based in the city strive to counter this. Sculptures by Simon & Tom Bloor (both b.1973) **FIG.7** and Ruth Claxton (b.1971), and an engaging film by Kihlberg & Henry (Karin Kihlberg, b.1978; Reuben Henry, b.1979) **FIG.8**, for instance, put forward positions on modernism and urbanism influenced by lived experiences of Birmingham that bring in street furniture and litter, the motor vehicle and road signage and domestic dwellings respectively. Their inclusion tethers the exhibition's concerns to the local as well as the global.

The curator, Melanie Pocock, acknowledges the broadness of the themes in the exhibition: it 'embraces the totality of modernism – globally, historically – and the totality of horror'.⁴ Although the exhibition does assemble a range of perspectives, featuring artists from Pakistan, Italy, Brazil, Sudan and the Philippines, who examine historic and contemporary issues, the two enormous subjects of horror and modernism offer a lot to consider in one display. Horror thrives while the utopia of modernism remains unrealised. Nostalgia plays a role, but modernist architecture is in many

instances characterised by decay, damp, systemic neglect and marginalisation, in Birmingham and elsewhere. The confinement and isolation of the pandemic linger within many of the works on show, so too does the heavy feeling of the ongoing failure of buildings to fulfil their necessary basic function as safe shelter. The exhibition makes clear that this is not (or at least not entirely) the fault of physical things – buildings, ring roads, public spaces – but, importantly, the failure of ideas, economics and politics.



Fig. 3 *Exit Sign*, by Abbas Zahedi. 2021. Customised exit sign, steel chains and eye bolts, 40 by 40 by 10 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).



Fig. 4 Still from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by Ho Tzu Nyen. 2011. HD video, duration 28 minutes. (Courtesy the artist and Kiang Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).



Fig. 5 *Entourage 1, la Guillotière/Lyon*, by Karim Kal. 2017. Inkjet print on Dibond, 150 by 225 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).



Fig. 6 *BRUTAL*, by NT. 2022. HD video, duration 10 minutes 42 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).



Fig. 7 Detail from *How to live in a city*, by Simon & Tom Bloor. 2022. Concrete, polystyrene, wood, paint and fixings. (Courtesy the artists; photograph Stuart Whipps; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).



Fig. 8 Still from *Slow Violence*, by Kihlberg & Henry. 2018–22. HD video, duration 16 minutes 10 seconds. (Courtesy the artists; exh. Ikon, Birmingham).

Exhibition details

Horror in the Modernist Block

Ikon, Birmingham

25th November 2022–1st May 2023

About this book



Horror in the Modernist Block

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Footnotes

- 1** At the exhibition launch on 25th November Zahedi also made reference to Jacob Rees-Mogg's comments in a radio interview that the Grenfell Tower fire victims lacked 'common sense' by not leaving the building, see K. Proctor: 'Rees-Mogg sorry for saying Grenfell victims lacked common sense', *The Guardian* (5th November 2019), available at theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/05/jacob-rees-mogg-claims-grenfell-victims-lacked-common-sense, accessed 11th December 2022.
- 2** Exhibitions include *In the Air* at the Wellcome Collection, London (19th May–16th October 2022), and the outdoor commission *Breathe: 2022* by Dryden Goodwin (18th May–30th November 2022), on a site close to the heavily polluted South Circular Road, London. Goodwin's work references the death of nine-year-old Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah in 2020 in which pollution was ruled to have played a significant part. See 'Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah: air pollution a factor in girl's death, inquest finds', *BBC News* (16th December 2020), available at bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-55330945, accessed 13th December 2022.
- 3** Karim Kal in conversation with the present reviewer, 25th November 2022.
- 4** Melanie Pocock quoted from the exhibition launch, 25th November 2022.

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