

Vitrine (noun): a glass display case: from French, shop window: ultimately from Latin - vitrum, glass (Oxford English Dictionary)



## 'LaunchPad'

**The Black Dogs, Amelia Crouch, Pippa Hale, Kerry Harker, Simon Lewandowski, WalkerHill and Amy Wilson**

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### 'Looking Through The Glass'

by Doug Sandle

Although based at Patrick Studios and concerned with curating and promoting artists' work, Vitrine is not an art gallery in the traditional sense, - its gallery space being the city of Leeds itself. Vitrine's concerns are for the display of temporary work presented behind glass and placed within the window spaces of the city's commercial and civic buildings. In using the window space as a vitrine, or presentation cabinet, Vitrine extends the protocols and forms of presenting art from the gallery to city space, and in so doing critiques both.

As traditionally used in galleries and museums, while enabling a focused attention, vitrines can also privilege and aestheticise the object within a rarefied and authoritarian context. By placing its exhibits in more publicly accessible windows, Vitrine retains the perceptual functions of placing objects behind glass, while creating more dynamic narratives that can engage the viewer within a context that is not predetermined by institutional codes of aesthetic engagement. Moreover, as its window locations are placed within the commercial and civic environment, Vitrine's interventions into such spaces raise issues about the nature and relationships of commerce, consumerism and culture within the public domain.

Following their successful Artsparkle 04 project, launchPAD features the work of seven artists over seven window / showcase locations. While the work displayed is diverse in media and practice, there is a common concern to exploit the formal opportunities and the nuances involved in looking at objects behind, or through glass.

**The Black Dogs** see all art as having a political implication, whether by direct ideological intervention or implicitly by the very act of creative engagement. Committed to breaking down the mystification and preciousness of much of the art world's self seeking concerns, their display seeks to make available and transparent all the information needed to set up and run an art show. Their combination of text and images, paradoxically and metaphorically, breaks through the glass barriers to democratise and make accessible that which the vitrine has more traditionally rarefied and kept distant.

Within the commercial structures of Leeds, perhaps the estate agent's window is one of the most significant vitrines used to display 'objects of desire' and **Amelia Crouch's** work examines this particular 'mode' of consumerism. The estate agent's window is a place where domestic and commercial interests coalesce and where there is collusion between customer and supplier that fetishises the

domestic so that the social realities of environmental and economic inequality are distanced. Crouch's work intends to examine and critique the structures and forms of such collusion.

**Pippa Hale's** work directly deals with our relationship with consumerism and the perceptual processes involved in window shopping. While windows closed by security screens and blinds frustrate the consumer's gaze and denies its gratification, Hale's work, on the one hand uses illusory shutters to tease our expectations and on the other, provides a substitute gratification by way of the sensual and aesthetic forms of her 'shut' windows. In denying the vitrine's role to facilitate a 'looking through' she draws attention to the aesthetic possibilities of the opaque and of surface.

Contemporary ceramicists are increasingly less concerned with aesthetically pleasing domestic objects and many are using the medium to expressively and symbolically explore individual and social experiences and to articulate both personal and cultural narratives. The work of **Kerry Harker**, in breaking and reassembling traditional willow pattern plates, explores the boundaries between art and craft. By her act of dismantling and mending the traditionally blue willow design, she creates metaphors of conflict and flawed reconciliation around narratives of domesticity.

**Simon Lewandowski** makes use of display and the manipulation of attention that is often carefully constructed within the shop window. However, rather than treat the objects of the consumer's gaze passively, his rows of lamp bulbs are activated to provide words and messages that sometimes challenge the consumer, while his crowded array of lamps provide formal patterns of light that momentarily transform potential clutter into geometric order.

Windows like the glass walls of a vitrine need cleaning and maintenance to facilitate the viewers gaze and the artist duo, **WalkerHill**, amusingly create miniature mechanical window cleaners to continuously clean the windows and reveal their aesthetically placed colour cards. The window cleaners, as they work to clear away the obfuscating glass surface, remind us that human intervention is required in our perceptions and engagement with art, which also depends on a social process as well as an aesthetic one. (Like real humans, whether teachers, technicians, curators or cleaners, the two mechanical workers will also have their rest days!).

Phrases such as 'through a glass darkly' and 'rose coloured spectacles' are indicative of the role of memory in looking and perception. **Amy Wilson's** work is concerned with memory and the experiences and processes that create shifts in meaning between the real and the imagined. Her paper diorama both documents and evokes her nostalgic memories of the novel *Wuthering Heights* and its associated experiences, which for the viewer, is in turn mediated by its scale and its placement behind glass.

Although there has been some frustration among contemporary visual artists and cultural commentators that, compared to some cities, Leeds has not hitherto

developed a strong and widely known context for supporting and promoting contemporary art, there is now a climate of change. The Leeds Initiative's cultural strategy recognises the need for processes and structures to be supportive of contemporary artists and organisations such as Axis, LVAf, East Street Arts and the Leeds Met gallery are taking a proactive role in championing artists' interests in Leeds. Events such as Lumen's Evolution, the Pulse festival and the forthcoming Situation Leeds festival are providing increased opportunities for Leeds to be a showcase for cutting edge work by local, national and international artists. That many initiatives are artist led is indicative of the energy and commitment of local artists. Vitrine's additional successful interventions with its aims to expand audiences, raise the cultural profile of Leeds and provide increased opportunities for artists within the city and its region are to be very much welcomed.

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