

THE ART OF PAUL ROONEY

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“They deal with the mundane, the ordinary and the untheatrical. The main characters are typical rather than exceptional: the situations are easily identifiable by the audience; and the relationships are as common as people. I am just now becoming aware of this area, this marvellous world of the ordinary.”

Ted Willis, scriptwriter, 1959

Born in 1967, Paul Rooney joins a generation of artists for whom the experience of pop music and popular culture (although one uses the term 'pop', here, in its broadest sense) has been as formative to their practice as an exposure to the history of art, cinema or literature. In fact, this immersion in the world of pop music might be said to have had an even more profound effect on their subsequent work – the experience being lived, visceral, and entwined with the boredoms, rituals and desires of daily life.

Making a quiet, unofficial survey of recent art-making in the UK, one can see how this relationship with the world of pop music has taken various forms in the work of vastly differing artists. The only common denominator is a loose generational grouping (a situation which might be said to echo the first generation of British Pop artists who joined the Royal College of Art in the autumn of 1959); but within this generational configuration we could find – at a glance – George Shaw, Jeremy Deller, Jim Lambie, David Shrigley, Martin Creed and Mark Leckey, amongst many others.

All male, all more concerned with anthropology than museology, this is a grouping (as opposed to a group) of artists for whom the experience of pop music and the environments of popular culture has directed their work to different strands of romanticism. Arguably, pop, for these artists, is what nature was for Turner and Wordsworth. They are compelled by pop music as a situation: as a cumulative framework for all manner of potential speculations on the nature of existence and creativity, from the contortions of irony to the shades of elegy or the edge of dogma.

And so an idea: that within the art of Paul Rooney, music and popular culture become portals to fluid time: Jules Verne-like conduits between the present and the past, and imagined presents and imagined pasts. Time-travelling across the landscapes of pop, which at times take shape as the often unheeded sites and thoroughfares of modern existence, Rooney makes art in a range of media – text, film, recorded music and more – which seems to trigger a rearrangement of our emotional gravitational field: how a familiar landscape can suddenly shift into the half life of its own reported history. He is interested, perhaps, in the pathology of the vernacular.

Brian Eno once told me that, “I have never thought of pop music as having anything to do with making music in the traditional sense; rather, it is about creating new, imaginary worlds, and inviting people to join them.”

In aspects of Rooney's art, this invitation seems described as a form of yearning, which in a bravura side-step of associative critique, links Eno's aphoristic definition of pop's capacity to an earlier pronouncement from Graham Greene, writing in 'Journey Without Maps' (1936): “Seediness has a very deep appeal, it seems to satisfy, temporarily, the sense of nostalgia for something lost, it seems to represent a stage further back.”

All of these issues – pop, the vernacular, temporality – find their way into the art of Paul Rooney; although to describe the extent and constitution of Rooney's multi-faceted art as 'issues' is perhaps wide of the mark. Better to describe them as 'feelings' – sudden swells in the sea of emotional response which are as vague yet specific as a mood. Rooney comes across as the Joker in the pack; on the one hand his art making appears deeply embedded within a particular relationship to pop as a situation and the mono-environments of the modern city; on the other, this relationship is in places so intense that it skews into something else – a kind of postmodern reclamation of Mass Observation, in which the factual cannot help but become poetic, and the anecdotes of recent history, charged as

opposed to flattened by their background in the dreary or dreamy thoroughfares of commonplace days, achieve an intoxicating stillness.

Paul Rooney is an artist who seems to prefer to work in the twilight back corridors of what being an artist might mean. There is a touch of the social realist about him, too – a propensity to trust the quotidian over the culturally elevated, and the found over the made. For the sake of easy reading, I have thus broken the remainder of this essay into three specific sections, attempting here and there to partner particular works by Rooney with the craggy but approachable veterans of cultural history.

Landscape

Born in Liverpool, Paul Rooney is an artist who has at times chosen to examine what once might have been described – with a certain cautious poise – as the regional sensibility of provincial Britain. Due in part to his method of working – often interacting with specific people, places and events – and in part to what can seem at times like an update of Free Cinema's engagement with social realism in the mid 1950s, Rooney has made works which use place itself as a mode of media.

Thus, he has made or is currently making works in which Manchester, Calderdale, Stoke on Trent, Bristol, Sheffield, Lancashire and Cumbria become both subject matter and creative enabler. But I think that Rooney works with landscape in a far more literary way, too. He is concerned with the subsonic manner in which place becomes evocation – such as in his single screen video projection with sound, 'Something Happening', made in 2003. This is the work in which a building society worker's description of her feelings about crowds is sung by a lone voice, to the tune of the triumphalist electro pop of The Human League's Top Twelve hit of May, 1981, 'Sound of the Crowd'. The building society adjoins the site of the former 'Crazy Daisy' night club, where Phil Oakey 'discovered' Joanne and Susanne – who subsequently became his group's iconic backing singers/dancers. The video is shot in such a way as to convey both the interior of an office, and the view out of the building society window (formerly the clubs' entrance). To add another incidental layer of Sheffield pop history to the fabric of the work, the voice on the soundtrack is that of Jarvis Cocker's sister, Saskia.

Rooney has an interest in the way that landscape is encoded with historic presences; in the focussed stillness of a work such 'Something Happening' (in which, arguably, nothing is actually 'happening' within this time zone, the action is all in reported temporality) he makes

eloquent the poetic sense of times passed – that landscape is the medium through which history resonates. But, vitally, Rooney seems particularly interested in the slippage between mythic history and the history of banality – the point at which the mythological collides with routine. But while Rooney is an artist whose work is often associated with the post-industrial cities and suburbs of the north west of England, there is also an increasing and eclectic internationalism about many of his pieces. Cuba, Rome, The Netherlands and Melbourne have all figured in his work – thus underlining the essential romanticism of his art. For Rooney, the promenade at Blackpool (see ‘Tram Stop’ 2005) no less than Parque John Lennon, Havana (see ‘No Sad Tomorrow’ 2005), no less than a Paris hotel room (see Rooney’s short story, ‘Towards The Heavenly Void of Infinite Space’ to be published by Serpent’s Tail in 2006) become venues for exotically imaginative stories – tales of encounters, epiphanies and memory. In terms of his relationship with landscape, therefore, Rooney is interested I think in the point where the ordinary appears to yield to a soft pressure of enquiry – the power of looking, one might say – and then, like some diaphanous membrane, give way to a place of heightened romance. Rooney’s art seems desirous of a Wonderland, reached from dull Here through the rabbit hole of pop, and peopled with both a liberated public and a cast of romantic heroes.

The year of Rooney’s birth, 1967, saw the publication by Penguin Books of the now iconic collection of three modern poets – Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten – under the collective title of ‘The Mersey Sound’. Once again, there was a pun in the title – the Mersey Sound could be read as both the voice of the Mersey based poets, the voice of the Mersey district itself, or a direct reference to the legendary pop music of Liverpool, dubbed by journalists of the early 1960s as either ‘The Mersey Sound’ or ‘Mersey Beat’. Here we are in deepest Rooney territory; for this was a grouping of poets for whom the regional became the universal, this translation being allowed by the near electrical power of pop’s presence within the routines of ordinary lives. There was all of the punning, too – and the time travel within the contemporary to access the presence of mythic figures: Adrian Henri’s ‘Poem In Memoriam of T.S.Eliot’ or Brian Patten’s ‘Somewhere Between Heaven and Woolworths – A Song’. For the poets of The Mersey Sound, as for Rooney, landscape was pop and pop was mythic – a world running parallel to the fizzy impersonality of where we tend, at times, to end up.

The Found

From his work with the artist group Common Culture, there has been a

directive within the art of Paul Rooney to work with found materials and found situations. Within these situations narratives occur, some of which feature iconic pop and rock musicians, comedians or television programmes.

This raises provocative questions about Rooney's relationship to the greater history of working with the found. Rooney has less relation to the European modernist sense of 'the found' (as one might locate the tradition in Cubism or Nouveau Realisme), but a greater affinity to the anthropology of the 'ordinary' as practised in the UK across the arts by a particular configuration of architects, film-makers and visual artists during the latter half of the 1950s. His sympathies with this lineage of enquiry stem from his identification of the quotidian as site and subject matter; his interest in working with the 'found history' of interviewees, and the resonance of 'found media' – in television programmes such as 'Top Of The Pops', 'Stars In Their Eyes', or Granada TV's now discontinued 'Celebration' series. Treating populism as a vital part of his palette, Rooney relates to the domestic in his comedies of recognition. Whether or not his work rides the perilous back curve of knowingness – the postmodern perception of cultural history as kitsch – might be discussed from the starting point that one definition of 'kitsch', is 'that which has been lost, thrown away or abandoned.' Thus within the the vivacity of populist media you might also find melancholy, nostalgia and a pervasive sense of loss. The Pop era reinvention of Graham Greene's equation of seediness to 'a stage further back'.

But Rooney also plays with the found. A fictional found letter (in 'Dear Guest', 2005, in which the voiceover is a reading of a letter left in a hotel room bedside draw by a room attendant) or a real found photograph (in 'Photograph Found On a Street In Rome', 1995-2002, a video recreation of the photograph in its original location, but without it's human subjects, on the soundtrack of which is a textual description of the original image set to music). These found items become the portals between fiction and reality – the imagined and the known; as such they acquire an agency to allow Rooney to explore the found landscape as an historical landscape above all – to play with the matrices of potential consequences. And his familiars in these conjuring tricks are his fictional representatives – Alain Chamois and Dermot Bucknall, a fanzine writer and singer respectively – whom one encounters within the magical world on the other side of the quotidian in several of Rooney's works. Above all, Rooney treats the modern landscape as field of potential finds – chat rooms, tower blocks, hotel lobbies, chair lifts, the refreshment trolley in a train corridor. And situations

become found places, as well – radio shows, audio guides, television programmes.

These are less 'objets trouvees' than field recordings; dry sociological occurrences which are then appropriated, their vacuity filled with high romance – poets, singers, self-recreated beings. All of whom, within their found landscape, are aspiring to escape their state of being lost.

Pop

Some years ago – around 2002 – I had lunch in Sheffield with Joanne Catherall and Susanne Sulley from The Human League. Joanne began the conversation by explaining, 'What you have to know about us, Michael, is that we are dead arty.' She went on to describe their shared passion, towards the end of the 1970s, in attempting to escape the banality and aggression of their home city of Sheffield through the new, imaginary worlds of pop.

This seemed at once modern and archaic; on the one hand, she was describing, blow for blow, reflex for reflex, the call of London which permeates the fables of kitchen sink cinema from the early 1960s – Liz says to Billy in John Schlesinger's film adaptation of *Billy Liar*, "It's this town, Billy, it's the people we know..." To find themselves, Liz and Billy must leave. But is the heightened world of pop's romance in the boring town in the middle of nowhere, or the centre of the metropolis? Rooney's relationship with pop music seems to encounter the physics of this dilemma.

Joanne went on to recount the occasion on which the two girls bunked off school, in order to go and see a concert in London by the New Romantic group, Japan – the singer of whom they both admired. Weeks were spent assembling their outfits – the basic elements from Wallis and charity shops, then, in the spirit of punk, the whole lot reassembled to become what the artist Linder has called 'pop's transformative garments'. Joanne wore a floor-length burgundy cloak, her entire body powdered white. The big day arrived – they went to London and saw Japan – right at the front of the audience, gazing up at singer David Sylvian's impossibly aloof profile – his masked eyes gently closed beneath the curve of his platinum blond fringe. But all the girls could subsequently remember of London, later, was a pub near Kings Cross. Once returned to Sheffield, their journey became an epic adventure – a defining moment in their lived creed of self-recreation through pop. Pop was the destination, not London.

Similarly, Rooney seems to use pop as a place in which his various fictional selves can become themselves, as well as a place where he can work in the medium of performed and recorded music. On his album 'Time on Their Hands', 1998, by the group Rooney, the listener might be reminded of any and all of the following: Patrick Fitzgerald's dour requiem to hope, 'Tonight', the later songs of Ivor Cutler, the Intense Emotion Society of middle period Dexys Midnight Runners, the industrial melancholy of Throbbing Gristle's 'Twenty Jazz Funk Greats' and the ambiguous intellectualism of the Television Personalities, notably their re-issue, 'Don't The Kids Love It.'

Rooney, as suggested earlier, is both steeped in the experience of pop and, one imagines, in slight recoil from its current ubiquity. A consequence of postmodernism has been the dismantling of pop's claim to represent 'otherness'; pop is now entertainment, as opposed to the agency of confrontation. Within this situation, therefore, an archival culture of popular culture has arisen; and pop's 'new, imaginary worlds', are now located as much within the past as the present. In some peculiar way, covert, intense, awkward, bedazzled, determined, assured, the art of Paul Rooney engages with the deep subjectivity of commonplace days, to which pop may or may not be the redeeming soundtrack. Ted Willis's 'marvellous world of the ordinary' has always been a place of heightened experience – never so distant from Wonderland, and whatever might be waiting for us there.

END.