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PAUL ROONEY



Paul Rooney was born in Liverpool

He studied at Edinburgh College of Art

Rooney currently lives and works in Liverpool.

A conversation between Glen Jamieson and Paul Rooney

Glen Jamieson: Hi Paul. For your OUTPOST solo show you are presenting *McKenzie*, a sound work inspired by the Liverpool legend William Mackenzie. Originally presented on Rodney Street in Liverpool overlooking the location of William MacKenzie's tomb, I imagine that *McKenzie* would have evoked collective memories and reveries particular to the locale, encouraging a new experience of walking by St Andrew's Church graveyard. What does it mean for you to take these memories, myths and legends from their local source and relocate them inside this Norfolk gallery?

Paul Rooney: As soon as I made the work, or as I was making it, I thought of it as existing in a space other than the actual grave or graveyard that the work refers to, even before it was shown in Rodney Street. So much so that the way the script is written almost requires that you are in a dark space with the voice, being addressed by the voice, rather than in a wide open sunny churchyard. So in that sense the OUTPOST space is the perfect context for it. Though the open air 'site specific' setting for the work in the graveyard had its own value: it was interesting because of the public reaction that the work received, as you say, it taps into the folk memory, or folk mythology, of that place quite directly, and we got a particularly animated reaction from a lot of the homeless people who knew the story about Mackenzie, and who used to sleep in the graveyard before it was fenced off and made inaccessible. But I would hope, as with all works that I have made in relation to particular sites, that the work can stand on its own two feet (or speaker stand) and does not need to be experienced in direct physical relation to the site. The work is not about a specific place, but about certain ideas that are triggered by that place, which is a crucial difference.

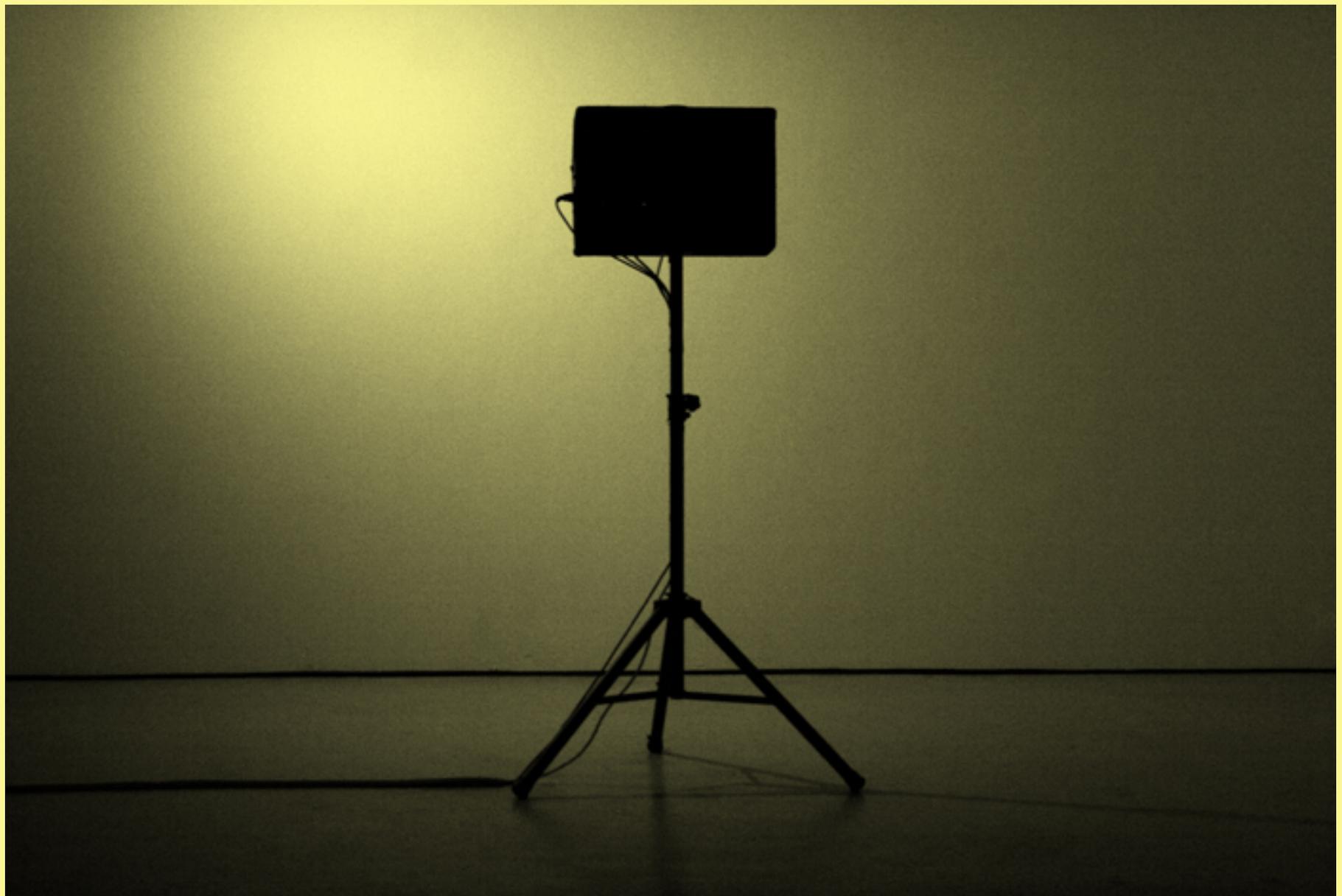
GJ: Yes, I have never been to Liverpool, and yet I fear the haunting presence of MacKenzie through his (our?) interrogator. Visitors leave off Tombland and pass through the black hole of OUTPOST's entrance into a dark tomb-like room. Going into the dark, the show might be described as a non-visual experience, but perhaps *McKenzie* offers us a complex aesthetic world?

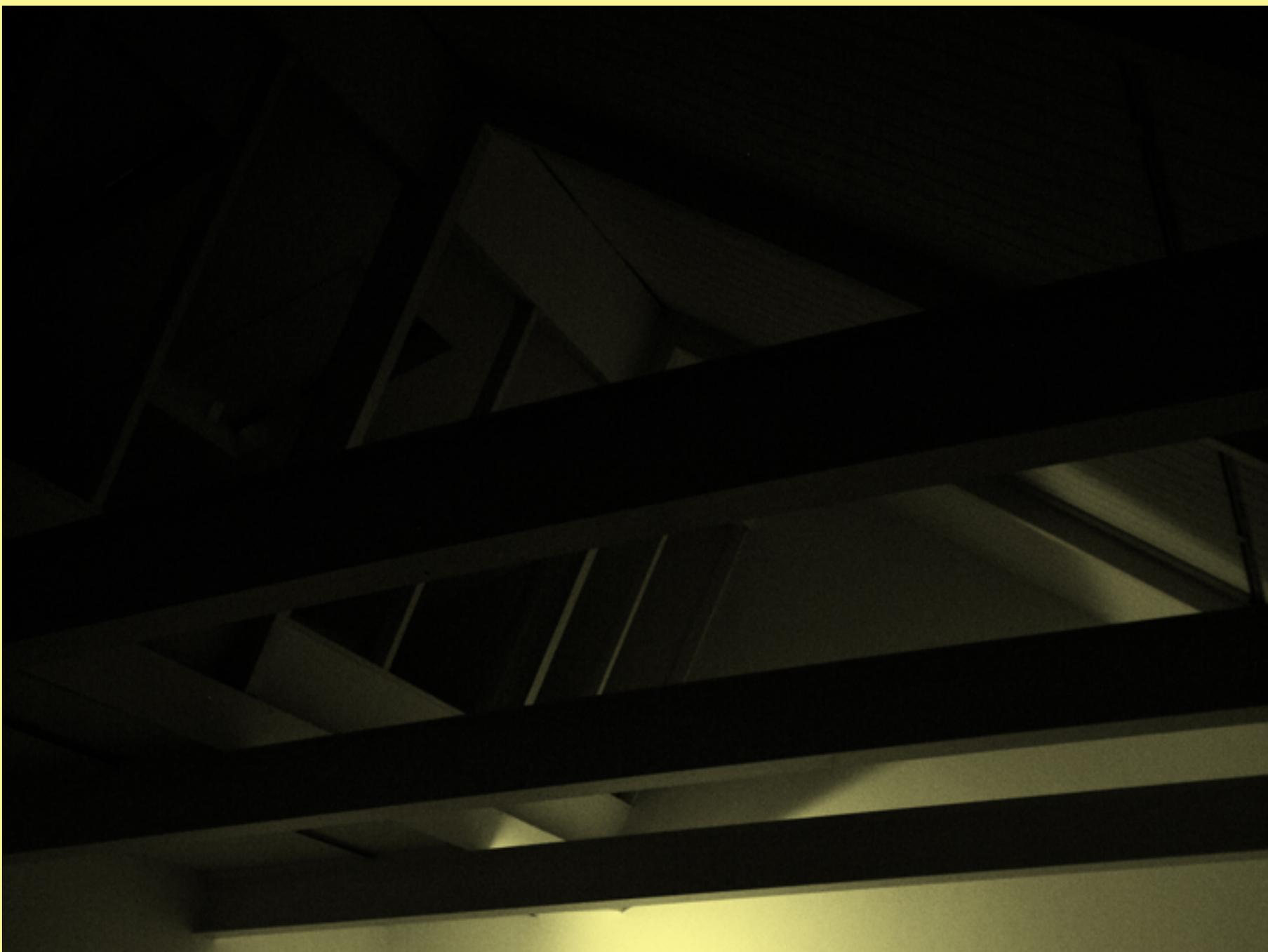
PR: The works that I make that are primarily sound still have some kind of a visual element. They are made to be presented, in a space of some kind, usually, which has its own visual character, or which is lit in a particular way. One sound work I have made (Lucy Over Lancashire, another flirtation with the Satanic!) exists in the form of a coloured vinyl record that is quite a beautiful object in itself. But yes, the experience of the work relies heavily on non-visual aspects: the tone of the voice, the volume of the music, the manipulations of the language. Like other sound-biased works I have done, the imagination of the viewer/listener is crucial to the intention; there is a possibility, a necessity

even, for the audience to construct the work in their own heads, and much of the 'visual' content of the work consists of imagery that is hinted at in language and completed by the listener/viewer's imagination. The picture of a gagged man being almost set alight by a lit match is potentially more powerful, or at least more keenly felt, if it is an image that we make for ourselves, rather than have illustrated for us.

GJ: It is perhaps these images that aren't recorded or visually represented that leave a lasting impression in our memory. The imagery of *McKenzie* is created through the monologue of the anonymous voice, who seems both amiable yet satanic. I understand that you studied painting before making a shift towards new media. The tensions between levels of language and music in *McKenzie* create a portrait of a complicated character (as the devil is difficult). Does your background in painting have an influence on your approach to writing?

PR: Somebody was talking to me recently about my 'writing' being obviously that of an artist, or someone visually trained, as it is more to do with conjuring images or visual ideas than 'writerly' concerns such as plot or character development. Even my paintings, the later ones, were partly text works, so language has been a constant interest over many years. In a work like *McKenzie* the language deliberately shifts from everyday chat to archaic phraseology, partly to underline the artifice of the forms that language can take, and the forms that individual character and identity can take, and how power is not necessarily wedded to certain ways of speaking but can make itself felt even in very familiar terms.







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