

NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

A REVIEW OF *DIASTR* by Michael Newton

BOTH AN EVENT AND EXHIBITION AT PHOENIX, BRIGHTON,

DECEMBER 2010



The *Shed* at 'Diast' by Kate Duncan

It's not hard to feel at times that we are living through another decade like the 1930s, low, dishonest and caught up with intimations of a coming catastrophe. An acquaintance of mine was busy working for a think-tank studying the potential environmental problems likely to be brought out by global warming; after a year on the job she had to go into therapy to cope with the depression produced by her work. Meanwhile terrorism spreads anxiety; wars proliferate; natural catastrophes wear away at our compassion. In smaller ways, every time we listen to the news many of us are confronted by hints of an ending, only to file away the feeling so as to get on with the daily business of living.

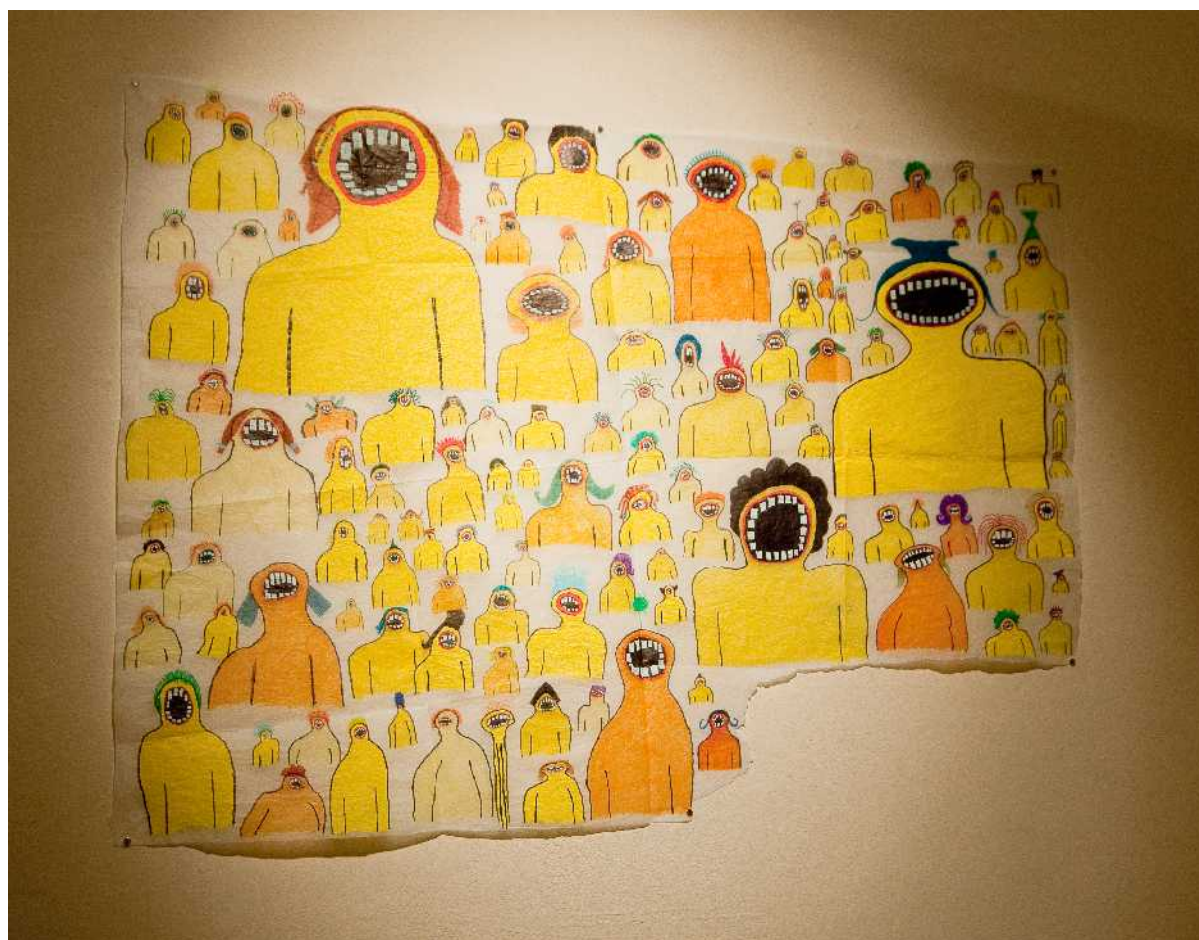
The exhibition, *Diastr*, held at the Phoenix Gallery in the autumn of 2010 brought together works by a disparate group of artists all of whom were ready to confront, rather than avoid, that subterranean feeling of unease. It is a measure of the success of this exhibition that the cumulative effect of the works it contained both seriously prompted a full look at the worst, and yet graced the viewer with an unexpected vitality. It's the zest and liveliness with which these art-works imagine the gloomy future that most surprises; if this is the end of the world, then it would seem an awful lot of us are going to feel fine.



The Charlies Suite by Shaun Doyle and Mally Mallinson

Even the threats contained in Shaun Doyle's and Mally Mallinson's *The Charlies Suite*, a collection of Charles Manson quotes coupled with iconic images (the 'Charlie says' government cartoons of the 1970s, Charlie Brown, Charlie Chaplin and Bronson), are oddly exhilarating. It's not just the unexpected juxtaposition of bringing together these pictures

with those words, it's also that quality of madcap mayhem present in Manson himself. Manson too was a believer in apocalypse, one that he hoped to hurry along a little by means of his shocking murders. Everything here would seem reduced to an emblem, one Charlie being pretty much the same as any other, were it not for the insanely persuasive force of Manson's words. It's an art-work that brings you up against something that it would be perilous simply to dismiss.



Beamo vs Mouths by Christy and Marley Cole

If, among other things, *The Charlies Suite* fuses together childhood memory and the darkness of an imminent violence, then that's a technique common to several pieces in the show. Kate Duncan's *Shed*, entirely constructed from found materials provides a sheltered vantage point and eye holes from which to peep out past the dioramas and on into the gallery. Christy and Marley Cole's collaborative piece, *Beamo versus Mouths*, has the wild and disturbing force of

Jean Dubuffet; both Eve Lloyd Knight's *Boring Ice Island* and Tom Cole's *Diastr* share the clear lines of comic-book art, though with the plot surgically removed. Mike Stoke's *Plug* series features one of the most seminally Ugly fictional Beano characters of the same name - Is a portrait, merely a plug for the sitter, artist or owner? and John Croft's strong and enigmatic paintings of *Batman and Robin*, and that apocalyptic pop star, *Ziggy Stardust*, all share this quality of disturbing innocence.



Batman and Robin by John Croft

It's there too in Tim Cole and Theo Lamarche's apparently chaotic, but playable board game, *Diastr* – an interactive work that recalls long nights trying to end a game of *Risk*, just as its bewilderingly complex board incorporates elements of Fritz Lang's futuristic film, *Metropolis*. During the launch event it was played out through the evening with live footage relayed to 20 or more TV screens located in different parts of the gallery.



Diastir the game played during launch & HRT perform audio visual ritual with Handyman of Sorrows projection



Diastir by Tim Cole and Theo Lamarche

Again the game implies an end-of-the-world narrative, though one that remains obscured and tantalisingly unclear. Yet for all the bafflement, it's the involving fun of the game that wins out; once again pleasure and a joyful attentiveness win out over the darkness of ending.

For this reason, it matches the spirit of the exhibition that while some of the works fit clearly with the apocalyptic mood, others might be thought as offering a vision outside of the

prevailing doom, a glance towards something more peaceful and affirming. Vincent Van Gogh remarked that he hoped that some of his paintings would ‘retain their calm even in the catastrophe’; a few of the works here evoke something of that feeling. Notably two of these are both connected to Cambodia: Tim Corrigan’s film of Cambodian experiences, *Don’t Think Too Much* and Philip Cole’s *Petrol Seller*, a Gerhard Richter-esque portrait of a Cambodian woman based on a photograph taken by his brother, Jon.

Cambodia might be thought of as a nation that has already gone through its own apocalypse; in the aftermath of the horrors inflicted by the Khmer Rouge; yet both works find in the everyday life of that country a quiet grace and casual beauty.



Petrol Seller by Philip Cole & Still from *Don't Think Too Much* by Tim Corrigan. Photographed by Wendy Pye

Dominating the entrance to the gallery, Neil Taylor's *Lighthouse Keeper*, partially submerged and made from a huge piece of found polystyrene, washed up besides the Thames in East London. This sculptural and metaphorical beacon to the world and its washed up ideas set alongside Harriet Murray's empty *Raft*, miles off course and stalled at the foot of the lighthouse keeper, a contemporary Kon Tiki.



The Lighthouse keeper by Harriet Murray and Neil Taylor

For all these reasons, while *Diastr* might have seemed in prospect an event that promised a grim look at our coming troubles, in fact it also contained within itself signs of that creativity and resourcefulness that we hope will get us out of trouble – and did so by unflinchingly reminding us of just the kind of trouble we're in.

Michael Newton is the author of 'Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children' (Faber), a book on 'Kind Hearts and Coronets' in the BFI Film Classics series, and the editor of the 'Penguin Book of Ghost Stories'. He has also written on theatre, literature and film for 'Arts International', the 'Times Literary Supplement', 'Poetry Review', 'London Review of Books' and 'The Guardian'.

Diastr was curated by Philip Cole and Alistair Duncan.

All Photography by Wendy Pye