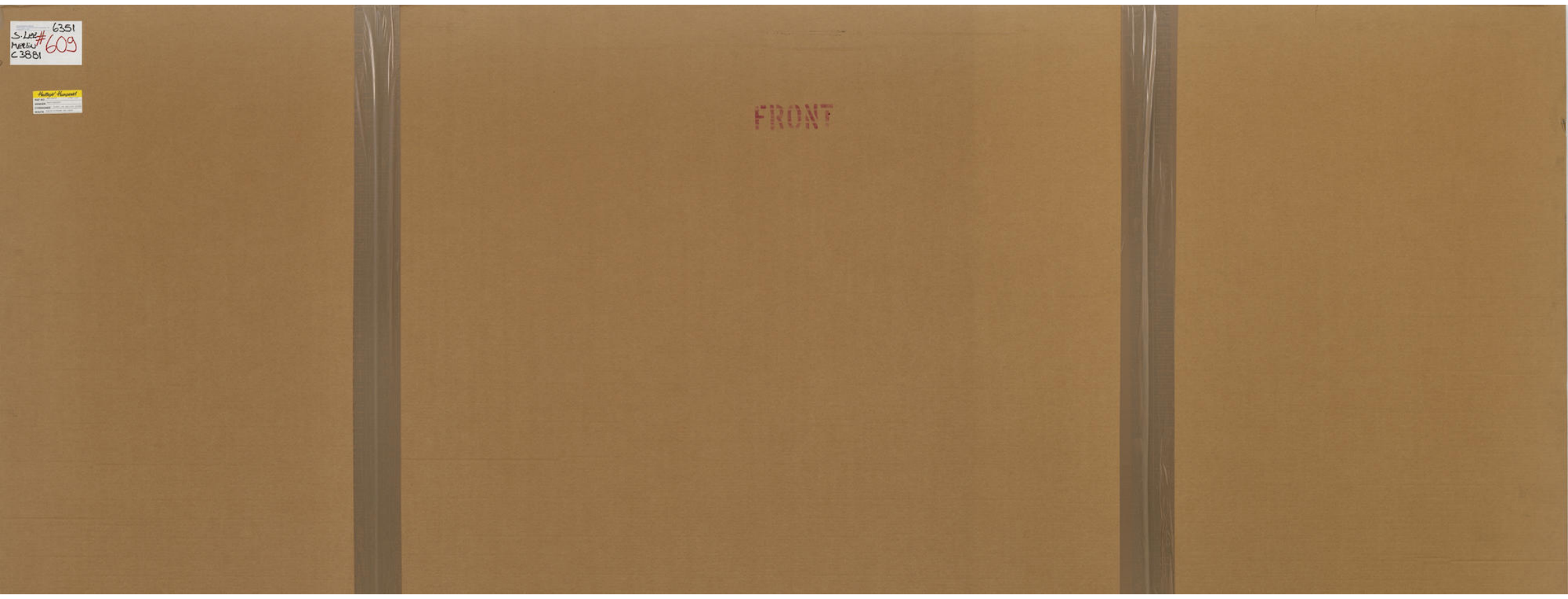


Merlin Carpenter: Do Not Open Until 2081

By George Vasey (https://artworkslondon.com/contributors/george-vasey)

Simon Lee Gallery

Fri 27 October – Sat 25 November 2017

While the paintings are up on the wall in Merlin Carpenter's show *Do Not Open Until 2081*, there isn't much to see. They're covered in cardboard, packed and ready for transport. It's a sight familiar to many curators and art handlers - packing tape, stickers indicating inventory details and dates of transit. The general public may be forgiven for thinking that the gallery was mid-install with the artist and tech team on a fag break. After reading the press release, it becomes clear that the packed paintings are in fact cover versions of John Hoyland's mid-Sixties abstract colour-field paintings. Carpenter completed the series in 2009 while Hoyland was still alive (he died in 2011) and seemingly the older artist was unamused by the appropriations, denying him permission to exhibit the work.

After collecting dust in Carpenter's studio for 8 years, the artist has finally developed a ruse to show the work, circumnavigating copyright issues by hiding them in plain sight. An addendum to the press release makes it clear that the buyer can only unwrap the work 70 years after Hoyland's death, the amount of time that needs to elapse for an artwork to be taken out of copyright. Any attempt to unwrap the work by the collector before that date in effect destroys it. From painting acerbic mottos onto blank canvases at openings, to presenting a room full of storage blankets as abstract monochromes, Carpenter's ascetic and conceptual take on painting often performs a type of pirouette with art world conventions.



Merlin Carpenter, *Do Not Open Until 2081*. Installation view, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong.



Merlin Carpenter, *After John Hoyland 30.8.64*, 2010, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong.

The exhibition is part tombstone and time capsule. We can read the covered paintings through the lens of trust. Do we believe Carpenter? Does the artist trust the collector, or will the

buyer just immediately tear off the cardboard once the work is safely ensconced within their apartment? What happens if they've been sold a dud? Is the work about shame? Perhaps Carpenter's cover versions are less Velvet Underground and more Cliff Richard. Kate Moss famously rarely said a word for many years - she perfected the idea of the model as tabula rasa, a public figure that doesn't project but rather is a figure that people project onto. The coolest people are often the ones that say the least - perhaps Carpenter is the Kate Moss of painting?

Like any good film, suspense is always strongest when the threat or punch line remains hidden and unseen or just out of reach. We can think about the vast majority of art that is bought and sold at auction without ever leaving storage - traded like stocks and shares by the 1 per cent. We can think about art historical precedents such as the wrapped paintings of Christo and about art that gets hoarded in store cupboards of museums around the world.



Merlin Carpenter, *Do Not Open Until 2081*. Installation view, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong.



Merlin Carpenter, *After John Hoyland 20.4.66*, 2009, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong.



Merlin Carpenter, After John Hoyland 20.1.63, 2009, 2017.Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong.

Why John Hoyland? Is this some kind of oedipal wrestling match between two painters of different generations? Hoyland's lyrical formalism seems a long way from Carpenter's approach. Maybe this is personal. There has been something of a resurgent interest in Hoyland's early work with Damien Hirst buying up dozens of his paintings and opening his Newport Street Gallery in 2015 with an expansive show. The press release talks of Hoyland's contribution to British painting but I'm not quite so sure. Perhaps I'm a cynic but it just doesn't quite ring true. Without being an expert on law, neither does Hoyland's refusal to let Carpenter sample his work. But maybe I'm looking for things that aren't there. I think in a more fundamental sense, the exhibition is about time. The labour of painting, the time of history, and a future that is just out of reach. Art is always a bargaining chip with the future. Economic and cultural values fluctuate, artists get re-appraised and forgotten. Ultimately though, I think that Carpenter knows that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Nothing is more compelling than the thing that's just out of reach.

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