

LISSON GALLERY

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## Press Release

Rodney Graham

*Central Questions of Philosophy*

3 October – 3 November 2018

67 Lisson Street, London

Opening: 2 October, 6 – 8pm

Rodney Graham's exhibition at Lisson Gallery London presents his first new body of lightboxes following the largest presentation of his work in this format last year at Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, Germany and Museum Voorlinden in Wassenaar, Netherlands. Since creating his first lightbox in 2007, Graham has evolved these works into a larger, more complex series that encompasses various aspects of his artistic practice, such as photography, sculpture and painting. Staged down to the finest of details – from the decoration and soft furnishings to the positioning of the central figure – the works are essentially stage sets for an accumulation of multi-layered fictions, with Graham consistently playing the starring role. Weaving together various subjects, and sprinkled with anecdotal art historical and pop culture references, the works not only comment on the mechanics of image and image-making through Graham's intricate process but are also employed as a vehicle to examine the epistemology of perception.

Graham's exhibition at Lisson Gallery features his largest lightbox to date, a four-panel piece featuring a 1940s gallery set loosely based on a photograph of Samuel Kootz. One of the first New York art dealers to champion Abstract Expressionist art, Kootz is shown smugly smoking a pipe in his apartment-turned gallery during an exhibition of work by Pablo Picasso in 1949. Graham takes on the role of Kootz in his new lightbox, hoovering the carpeted floors in preparation for an exhibition opening. In the background, an art collector admires a set of abstract paintings, created by Graham and based on a drawing by Alexander Rodchenko (*Abstract Composition*, 1941). Here we see Graham's characteristic and dizzying layering effect: he is an artist, acting as a gallerist, in a gallery set that he has created, with artworks he has created inspired by another artist, as an artwork.

While Graham has previously questioned the roles expected of an artist, in works like *The Gifted Amateur*, Nov. 10th, 1962 (2007) or more recently *Pipe Cleaner Artist*, Amalfi, '61 (2013), *Vacuuming the Gallery 1949* (2018) probes at the depictions and cultural tropes associated with art dealers, who are constantly vying for the attention of fatigued collectors, while pointing to the more mundane and tedious aspects of running an art gallery. This is not just work about art history but art about art in its natural habitat. The result is simple, economic and charmingly effective. It creates an immersive experience of an art gallery of another time, showing traces of history that resonate with art galleries today. A number of new paintings in a vaguely abstract style, like those featured in *Vacuuming the Gallery 1949*, are also on view upstairs at 67 Lisson Street, bringing with it a satisfying circularity: the paintings Graham created for his gallery lightbox set are now brought to life in an actual art gallery. Realised in oil paint and sand on gessoed canvas, the paintings are an amalgamation of Rodchenko's original *Abstract Composition*, with portions reassembled by Graham in Photoshop, then re-realised as a painting and cut up again, *ad infinitum*.

In Graham's next *mise-en-scene*, he poses as an intellectual figure for a formal photographic portrait, seated in a stately armchair and surrounded by books on philosophy. The diptych is a recreation of two Pelican paperback covers associated with the British philosopher A.J. Ayer's *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, an introduction to some of the most frequently discussed areas of philosophy. One panel shows Graham posing as Ayer as a solitary figure, and the other shows Graham as Ayer with his dog. The work references Ayer's philosophical underpinnings, notably his

emphasis on logical empiricism and the verification principle, a theory of knowledge that asserts only statements verifiable through empirical observation are cognitively meaningful. Graham's lightbox, eponymously titled *Central Questions of Philosophy*, makes two propositions: 'a philosopher sits in a chair' and 'a philosopher and a dog sits in a chair'. The work probes the different facets of our claims to knowledge, particularly perceptual knowledge, that relies on inductive inference for its credence. It is this induction, subtle hints and inferences that characterise Graham's work, along with its self-reflexive nature.

An ornate brass telephone takes centre stage in a smaller lightbox by Graham, titled *Unused Prop: French Telephone* (2018). The phone was created as a prop for another artwork that was never realised: a reconstruction of a still from Martin Scorsese's classic crime thriller *The King of Comedy* – where the kidnapped talk show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis) speaks on the phone while one of his kidnappers (Sandra Bernhard) holds a gun to his head. The final lightbox in the show borrows from a Mallarme-style poem written by Graham that was intended as an instructional guide for a tattoo of the comic book figure Popeye. *Tattooed Man on Balcony* (2018) follows this work and shows Graham in a contemporary setting as a tattoo aficionado, dressed in the style of a Rockabilly with a retro pompadour, standing on a balcony and looking off into the distance. The scene is undeniably suburban, its location given away only by the architectural structure, 'Vancouver Specials', that are known to Canada. Domesticity is also a feature in *Elvis Door*, an exact replica of Elvis Presley's screen door at his home in Graceland, fabricated in silver. Presented alongside this on a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British games table is a spring-loaded, solid silver slipcase that holds a rare publication, the first Arabic translation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* that dates to the early 1800s. Nearby is a short film featuring a demonstration by Graham on the mechanics of the slipcase and table.

### **About Rodney Graham**

Rodney Graham pulls at the threads of cultural and intellectual history through photography, film, music, performance and painting. He presents cyclical narratives that pop with puns and references to literature and philosophy, from Lewis Carroll to Sigmund Freud to Kurt Cobain, with a sense of humour that betrays Graham's footing in the post-punk scene of late 1970s Vancouver. The nine-minute loop *Vexation Island* (1997) presents the artist as a 17th-century sailor, lying unconscious under a coconut tree with a bruise on his head; after eight and a half minutes he gets up and shakes the tree inducing a coconut to fall and knock him out, and for the sequence to start again. Such dream states and the ramblings of the unconscious are rooted in Graham's earlier upside-down photographs of oak trees. Inversion, Graham explains, has a logic: "You don't have to delve very deeply into modern physics to realise that the scientific view holds that the world is really not as it appears. Before the brain rights it, the eye sees a tree upside down in the same way it appears on the glass back of the large format field camera I use."

Rodney Graham was born in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada in 1949. He graduated from the University of British Columbia, Burnaby, Canada in 1971 and lives and works in Vancouver, Canada. Solo exhibitions include Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, Germany (2017); Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands (2017); BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2017); Le Constortium, Dijon, France (2016); Sammlung Goetz, Munich, Germany (2015); Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada (2014); Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada (2012); Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria (2011); Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain (2010); Jeu de Paume, Paris, France (2009); Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, CA, USA (2004); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, UK (2002); Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany (2001); and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, Austria (1999). He has participated in group exhibitions such as the Carnegie International (2013); the 13th, 14th and 17th Sydney Biennales, Australia (2002, 2006, 2010); the Whitney Biennial, New York, USA (2006); and the Biennale d'Art contemporain de Lyon, France (2003). He represented Canada at the 47th Venice Biennale, Italy (1997) and among awards he has received the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, Toronto, Canada (2004); the Kurt Schwitters-Preis, Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Germany (2006); and the Audain Prize for lifetime achievement in visual arts, British Columbia, Canada (2011). In 2016, Rodney Graham was appointed as an Officer of the Order of Canada for his contributions to Canadian contemporary art.

### **About Lisson Gallery**

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and develops more than 50 international artists across two exhibition spaces in London and two in New York. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Richard Long, before introducing a generation of significant British sculptors, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. In addition to a number of renowned artist estates, including the Antonio Calderera Foundation, the Leon Polk Smith Foundation and the John Latham Foundation, the gallery represents leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller and Tatsuo

Miyajima. It is also responsible for raising the profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost and Wael Shawky.

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