*Art Daily*
16 April, 2019

artdaily.org

# Lisson Gallery opens Julian Opie's first solo gallery exhibition in New York City

Installation view of Julian Opie at Lisson Gallery, New York (1 March – 20 April 2019)
© Julian Opie. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

**NEW YORK, NY.-** For Julian Opie's first solo gallery exhibition in New York City, Lisson Gallery presents a new body of work focused on the artist's portraits, presenting both individual heads and full-length groups. As Opie's first presentation in Manhattan since his major Public Art Fund commission in City Hall Park in 2004, this presentation captures the people and daily routines that make up life in communities around New York City.

Over the years Opie has quietly observed the homogenisation of the world in cities and the people around him – from friends to strangers on the street – to produce portraits of individuals and society. Whether recreating a skyscraper, a serene landscape on the Cornish coast, or a selection of runners in a city park, Opie constructs an environment, a space that echoes the colours and shapes he observes. Fascinated by the act of picturing, and how that influences our ability to navigate and interact with the world, the artist's portraits have become ubiquitous in locations across the globe.

The exhibition includes four individual portraits, all in profile, composed of auto paint on aluminium: Pony Tail., Hoodie., Diamond earring. and Dark Glasses. (all 2019). Despite the simplicity of the portraits, Opie's process involves building up rather than reducing, beginning with one aluminium layer and adding onto the surface to shape the form, resulting in a three-dimensional, semi-sculptural object. Each figure, oscillating between figuration and abstraction, is embodied through one singular characteristic, be it their hairstyle, jewellery or clothing. A realist painter, Opie captures not the accuracy of a photograph, but the realism of a memory, a glance, or a feeling; each character's identity determined by the artist's intangible experience or memory of the encounter.

Along the opposite wall are four group portraits, each featuring five individuals walking: Walking in New York 1., 2., 3., and 4. (all 2019). This body of work, based on photographs of specific scenes in neighbourhoods across New York, presents a snapshot of life in the city. Surrounded by abstracted figures, these portraits are at once distinctly individual and yet universal, recalling the anonymity omnipresent in modern city life. Opie echoes the arrangement and rhythmic movement of Greek vases and stone-carved Roman friezes, bringing these traditions into the modern-day – just as an ancient frieze mural would depict the identity of a warrior through their sword or valiant pose, Opie characterises each individual through a specific stance, adornment, attire or attitude.

The exhibition also features three life-size, patinated bronze sculptures standing in the gallery amongst the paintings. In each figure represented in Leather Jacket., Hoodie. and Two Bags. (all 2019), the viewer instinctively builds a narrative around the character, recalling typical scenes from metropolitan life, from a man smoking casually, perhaps at a bus stop or waiting for a friend, to a woman travelling home with shopping bags, aimlessly checking her phone. Familiar yet unnervingly distant, these figures highlight questions about our own reality – as individuals and as a society – and prompt us to ask, what object or pose would we choose to characterise our existence?

*theguardian.com*
25 April 2018

The Guardian

# Julian Opie: 'It's only when you are bored that you can see'

The artist explains how he created the crows, Cornish vistas and 3D cityscapes of his most recent work

by Julian Opie

## Runners

▲ Running Men. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

I sent two of my assistants out to the park to film people walking and, on reviewing the films, I found that many joggers had run past the camera.

Humans are built for running. I have read they can outrun a wolf or a horse over long distances. By drawing one stride with around 30 frames I can set a drawing in motion to run smoothly forever as an animation and, by grouping a few joggers together in a painting, I can create a dynamic, complex composition with implied movement. A second later and the runners would have moved on and the composition, so carefully planned, would be changed and lost.

▲ Running Women. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

I was thinking of the striding athletes circling ancient Greek vases, and of stone-carved Roman friezes of battling warriors. The random positions of striding legs and pumping arms slice up the space, while hair and phone cables and shoelaces flick and bounce. Sporting clothes and equipment could be the modern equivalent of the armour of the past.

## Walking in Melbourne

▲ Walking in Melbourne 1 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Walking in Melbourne 2 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Walking in Melbourne 3 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Walking in Melbourne 4 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Walking in Melbourne 5 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Walking in Melbourne 6 of 6 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Planning for a show in Australia I asked a local photographer to set up his camera in various places around Melbourne and record the passers-by. He sent hundreds of photographs and I set about drawing the best ones.

Some 60 drawings later, I have a palette of characters and have been using them in a range of paintings and statues. Each one throws up surprises and opportunities that I could not invent - a tattoo or a tasselled dress, a goatee or the logo on a T-shirt. I have one group from the middle of the city and one from the beach. By making groups of six walkers I get a street crowd, and a list, and a kind of fashion parade.

The photographed moment was random and fleeting but by cutting the drawing from thick, black card - by carving it permanently - it slows down and solidifies it. Random decisions such as wearing a striped top or swinging a bag or water bottle become solid decisions and material that you could run your finger over.

## Modern towers

▲ Modern Towers 1 of 3. Photograph: Alex Delfanne/© Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Modern Towers 2 of 3. Photograph: Alex Delfanne/© Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

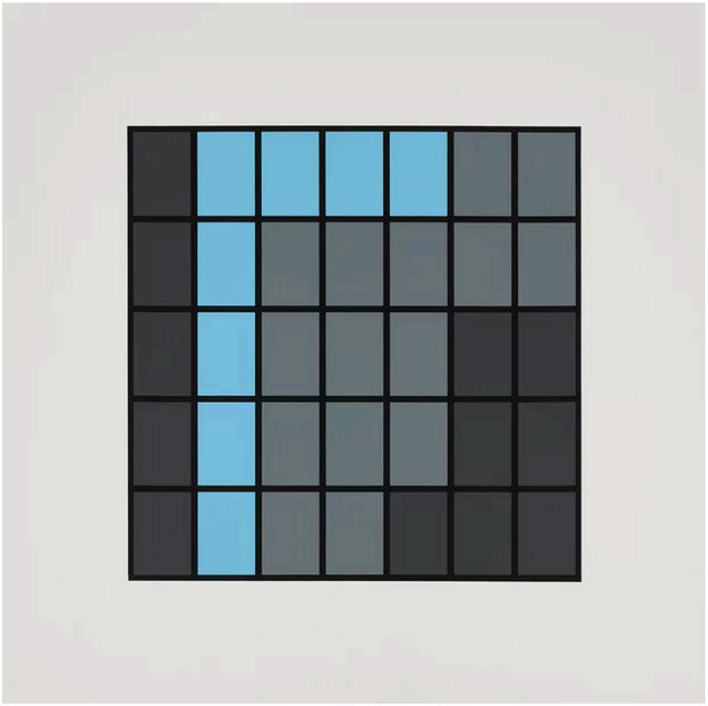
▲ Modern Towers 3 of 3. Photograph: Alex Delfanne/© Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Making art is a fairly odd decision, but people have been doing it since for ever. If doodling while on the phone I'm inclined to draw a 3D cube and then another. It's the fastest way to create imaginary space, another world. I live in London and move through a labyrinth of extruded rectangles like an ant on a computer board. I understand space and see movement by the changing views on these shapes. By simply adding flat squares to the sides of my extruded rectangles I create modern buildings.

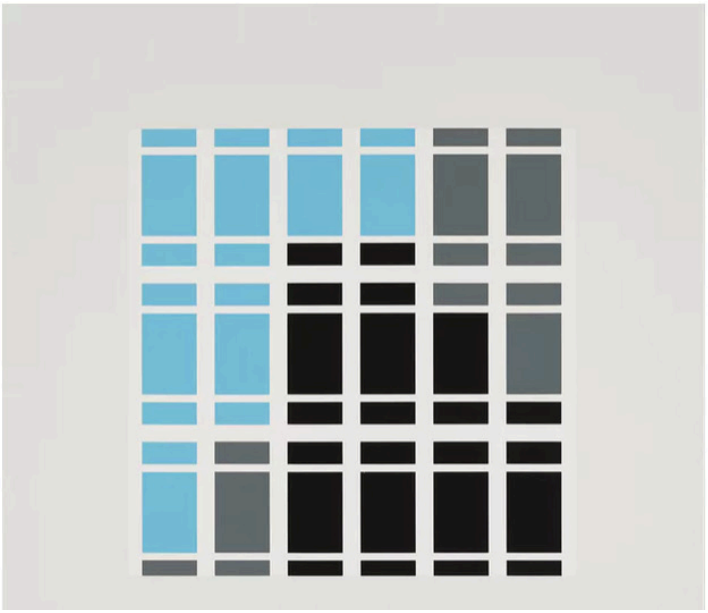
These basic building blocks of modern towns are universal and are engraved on our retinas and minds, recognisable without thought or interpretation. By colouring the windows and suggesting glassy reflections the surfaces of the blocks become pictorial and seem to shimmer a bit. My aim is to make a series of flat drawings into a real space that is also illusory.

I do photograph real buildings but in the end for these works I just juggled different shaped rectangles to get the feel of a building.

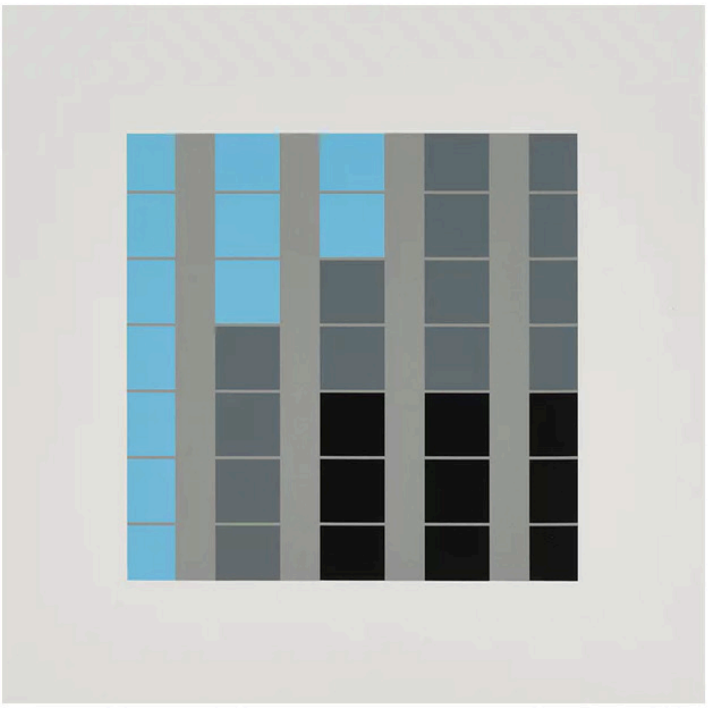
## Office windows



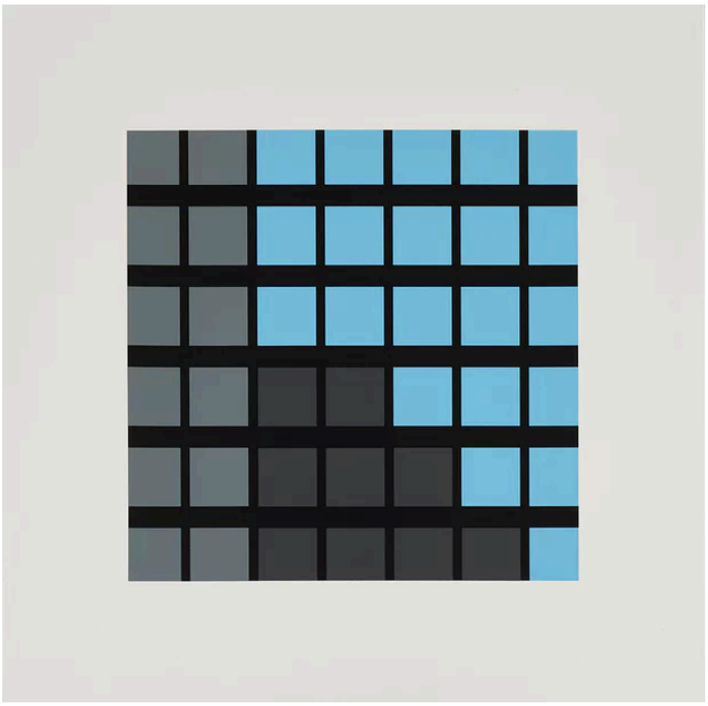
▲ D3. Office Windows Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London



▲ C3. Office Windows Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London



▲ B2. Office Windows Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London



▲ A1. Office Windows. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

While sorting out the colours of the windows for the 3D towers, I got an assistant to tape some painted squares on to the wall. Although she only painted a few windows, the result looked oddly realistic, like glass and like the surface of a building but also like modern abstract art. I set about making a small painting of the windows of each building.

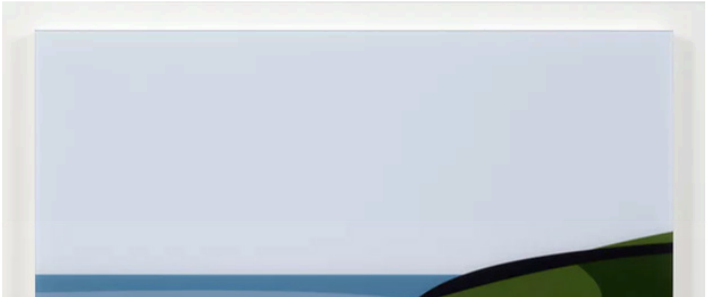
# Cornish coast

▲ Gribbin Head. From: Cornish Coast 1. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

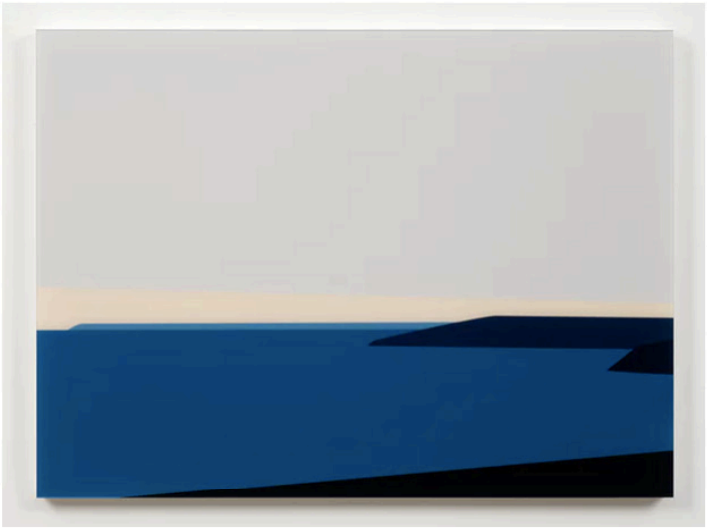
▲ Lantic Bay. From: Cornish Coast 1. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Cornwall is beautiful. You see the sky and the sea and the green fields. These colours surround you and fill your eyes, creating an environment, a space to be in that echoes the colours and shapes on your retina. Anything and anywhere is visible but beauty means that you can hold it in your eyes, make a picture of it.

I think we use picturing all the time in order to navigate and interact and it's how I know I am present. By putting that picture back out into the world, on the cave wall or website or gallery, I can extend, record and play with what I see. By looking at that picture there is a doubling up of the process, a view of a view.



▲ Lantivet Coast. From: Cornish Coast 1 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

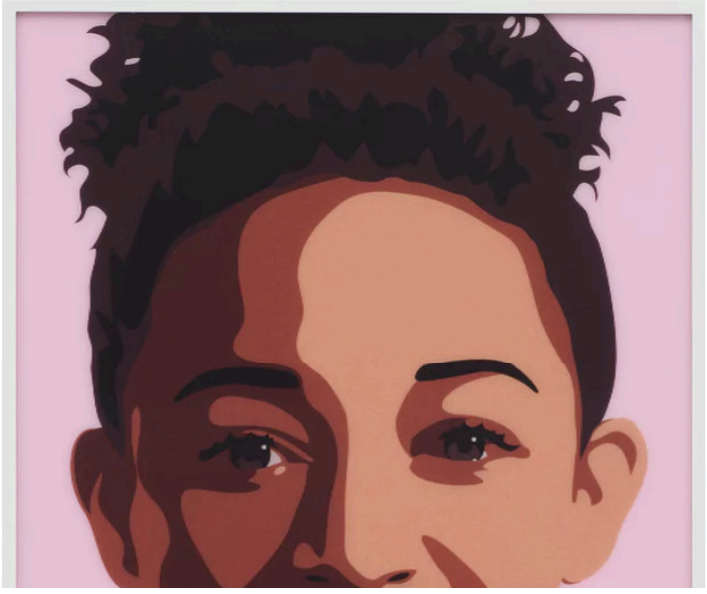


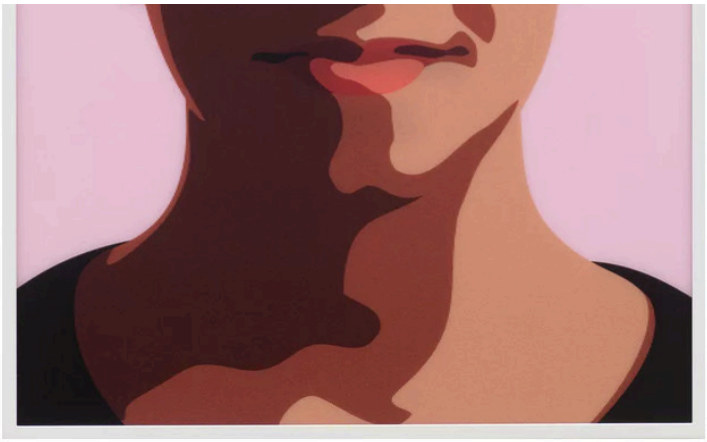
▲ Gribbin Peninsula. From: Cornish Coast 2 Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Being under two metres tall, humans are in a poor position to understand their surroundings. The world that is so clear and understandable from an aeroplane is simply a series of narrow coloured stripes from the ground. In Cornwall the stripes are dark, rich greens and aqua greys. As my holidays pass, the colours change, and as we walk along the cliffs the stripes twist and slide.

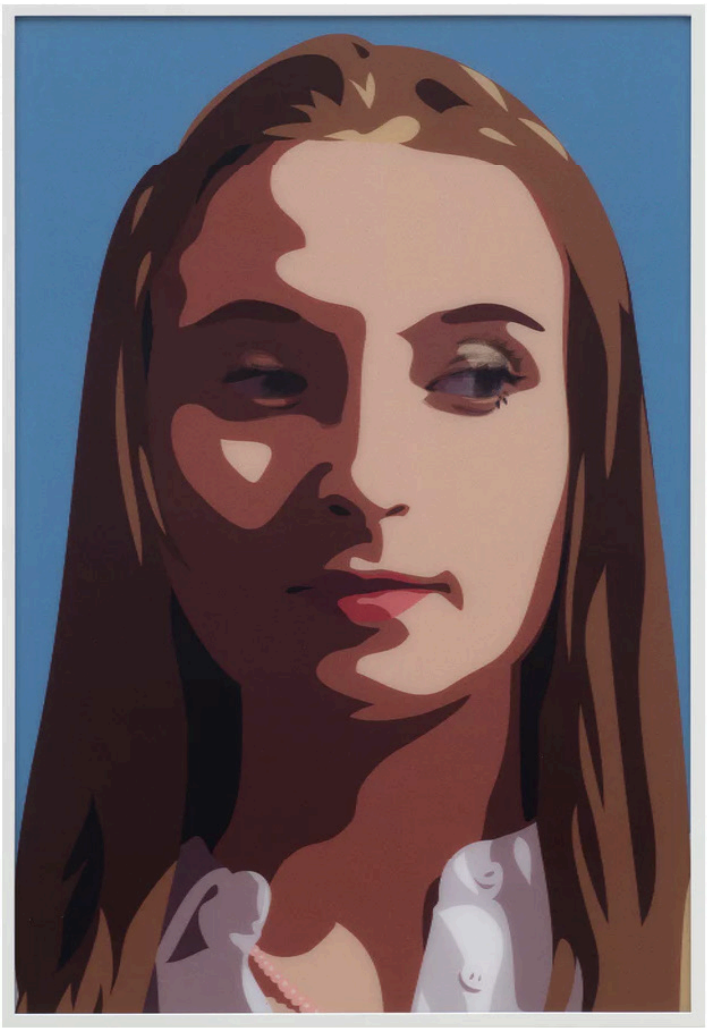
I have been drawing these stripes all my life in various materials and scales and levels of detail. My aim is always realism but not in the sense of photographic detail, more the realism of a glance or a memory or the feeling of being immersed all day in a view. Then I come back to London and draw all this in computer-sharp lines with inkjet printers on plastics and glass.

## Lenticular portraits





▲ Imogen Smiling. From: 3 Portraits. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London



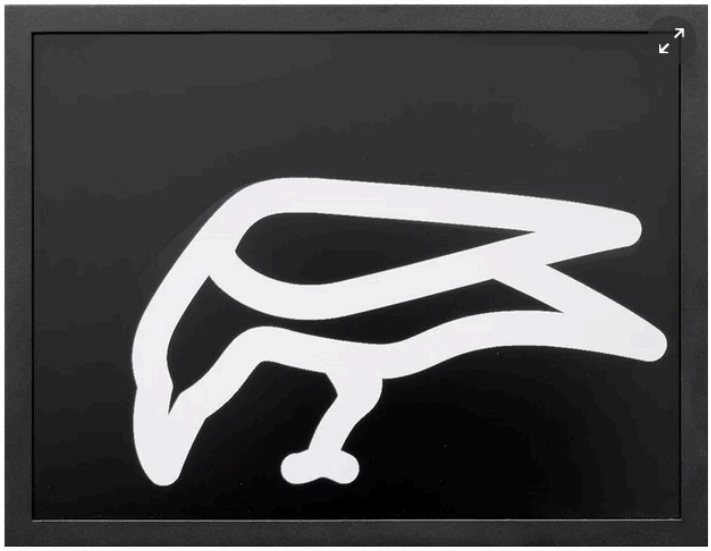
▲ Elena Rolling Her Eyes. From: 3 Portraits. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

▲ Sissi Looking Upwards. From: 3 Portraits. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

In order to draw subtle movements of the face, I had to find a new way of drawing. I looked at Japanese manga and old masters to understand how shadows could be used instead of lines. I used a 19th-century invention of grooved lenticular lenses that gives the illusion of movement as you pass by a picture. Like the classic haunted house portraits whose eyes follow you, I can make my sitters respond to the viewer. It's a simple trick that fools no one, but nonetheless breaks the rules of reality. Magic is an important part of art and allows the picture to break away from normality and become communication, language, alive.

I used two of my daughters and a commissioned sitter for this project and feel the interaction with a young person is easier to deal with.

## Crows



▲ Crow pecking. Photograph: Kris Emmerson/© Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

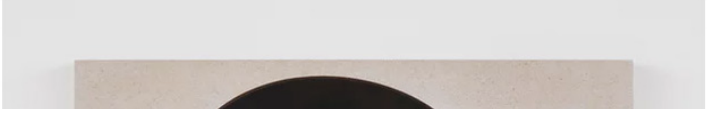
▲ Crow turning. Photograph: Kris Emmerson/© Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

On my walk to work I pass through a small park, and there are always a bunch of rowdy, jet black crows hanging around. I know they see me but they are aloof and seldom fly off. I spent a morning filming them and identified a number of specific movements. The movement seems to be as crow-like as the drawing itself.

I don't invent or imagine things, just notice and record them. The choices about scale, style, language, materials and reference are my tools. I choose normal things because I must know them intimately and feel they are common currency so they can be turned into symbols. I don't draw parrots or flamingoes, I like the boring as it's only when you are bored that you can see.

## Heads

▲ Lawyer. From Stone Heads. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London



▲ Mechanic. From Stone Heads. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Certain places are full of language and ways of making words from materials. Airports and shopping malls offer a huge pallet of techniques in glass and plastic and electronic screens. The mood is hard and slick and vulgar but seductive.

A completely different but equally useful mood and set of materials is found in graveyards and memorials. No one would make a gravestone from acrylic and LEDs. Materials create mood and suggest meaning. When I see something I see the bounced light but also read the history, recognise the value and weight, the density and age and reference. Engraved stone and inlaid bronze have a heavy, slow melancholic mood. I work near Bunhill Fields, an ancient London graveyard (Bone Hill), that is a lovely calm place - I have photographed and drawn the office workers that take the short cut past the 18th-century tombs of their London predecessors. Daniel Defoe and John Bunyan are buried there, and the massed stone tombs and gravestones seem to suggest another crowded London.

## Statuettes

▲ Telephone. From: Melbourne Statuettes. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

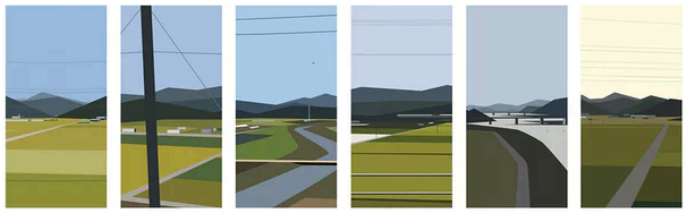
▲ Headphones. From: Melbourne Statuettes. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

My grandfather had a walnut and leather desk in his office, and certain heavy, expensive items sat on this at my eye level. Bakelite lamps and stone pen holders, leatherbound books and glass bottles of ink.

We live in a mental construct like a computer game; we navigate through what we sense, making thousands of computations and judgments to stay safe and function. I draw the people waiting to cross a busy road checking their phones and shifting their balance and bags and turn them into models, stand-ins that can be placed and played with.

A person casts a shadow that is a flat drawing of themselves that can be seen, copied and rebuilt. A photograph is a cast-light shadow and so is a drawing but it includes the artist, the drawer, as part of that process. Anyway, there on the desk the statuettes stand and turn the surface into their surface - the desk becomes a pavement.

## Seoul to Busan



▲ Seoul to Busan 1-6. Photograph: © Julian Opie. Courtesy artist and Alan Cristea Gallery, London

Looking directly at something is not always the best way to see it. Look straight at a dim star and it disappears. If you look down the centre of your train carriage and become aware of the landscape outside the windows, you can see it better, not the details but the shape and colour, the way the hills roll and the fields shift shape as you pass. You can move an object in your hands to understand its shape but you must pass through a landscape to see it properly.

My father used to say that speed is the only new experience (he did not ski or ride a horse), and as I travelled by train from Seoul to Busan in South Korea I felt that I could draw the speed, the passing time, the rice fields, mountains, rivers and cables with a series of sliding lateral images that lacked detail but gave the sense of movement. I used a flag-making company in the UK to print soft, glimpsed images that could wave or be pushed past like drapes or banners.

● Julian Opie is at Alan Cristea Gallery, London from 26 April to 16 June.

*Wallpaper**
January 2018

Wallpaper*

# LINES MEN

## Architects Carmody Groarke redraw artist Julian Opie's London studio

WRITER: ELLIE STATHAKI

A first glimpse inside Julian Opie's studio in Shoreditch, East London, does not reveal much about its recent architectural transformation. Its battered floorboards and hefty timber roof trusses could have been there for centuries. In fact, hardly anything in this refurbished old furniture workshop, which has served as the artist's base – and, for a while, live/work space – since 1987, screams 'new'. Yet new it is, following a complete overhaul by Carmody Groarke in a process that lasted over four years. It is testament to the London practice's masterful sleight of hand in merging old and new.

The idea for the project was born when planning permission was granted for a big new hotel in a plot just feet away from the studio's back wall. Concerned about privacy and changes in light, Opie decided to take the opportunity and start a project of his own. The plan was to extend his workspace – outgrown by his studio team – adapting it in response to the construction next door. Kevin Carmody and Andy Groarke were already his go-to architects and this would be the latest in a series of collaborations with the artist, the first being Opie's London home back in 2006. 'I appreciate Carmody Groarke's straightforward approach and brilliant understanding of space, so they seemed the obvious choice of architect,' Opie explains.

ABOVE, JULIAN OPIE DESIGNED OUR LIMITED-EDITION COVER, AVAILABLE TO SUBSCRIBERS. SEE WALLPAPER.COM ★

It was not just their established relationship that made the young London practice the perfect partner. Groarke and Carmody met at David Chipperfield's office while – rather fittingly – working together on another artist's studio, this one for Antony Gormley. They joined forces and set up shop soon after, and their independent practice turned ten years old in 2016. Yet their portfolio shows a maturity and diversity rare in an emerging practice. Indeed, 'emerging' hardly seems an appropriate tag. While it is not uncommon »

THIS PAGE, IN OPIE'S STUDIO, HIS MODEL FOR A METAL STATUE IS SURROUNDED BY PIECES FROM HIS OWN ART COLLECTION, INCLUDING, LEFT, A PAINTED EGYPTIAN WOODEN HEAD (C 1600-1100 BC) AND, SECOND FROM RIGHT, A TERRACOTTA BUST OF THE COMPOSER CHRISTOPH GLUCK BY JEAN-ANTOINE HOUDON (C 1770)

OPPOSITE, CARMODY GROARKE'S STEEL-CLAD ADDITION INCREASES THE SPACE BY SOME 100 SQ M

## 'I am proud of how my building looks cared for, dynamic and ready for work' – Julian Opie

for a new practice to take the better part of ten years just to complete its first flagship project, Carmody Groarke has already had plenty of attention-grabbing commissions, including a temporary nightclub, a collaboration with Carsten Höller for Fondazione Prada, and timber pavilions for the Frieze Art Fair.

The pair have a knack for creating experiences and navigating different typologies and scales, especially when it comes to projects merging arts and architecture. Their affinity with the arts has been key since the practice's inception, their output ranging from large-scale galleries to artists' ateliers and exhibition design. 'Our first project, and the springboard to set up our practice, was a competition win, the Coney Island Parachute Pavilion,' recalls Groarke. 'It combined culture, pavilions and temporary architecture, art, and our desire to seek and create opportunities. All seem to be themes that became recurrent in our practice.'

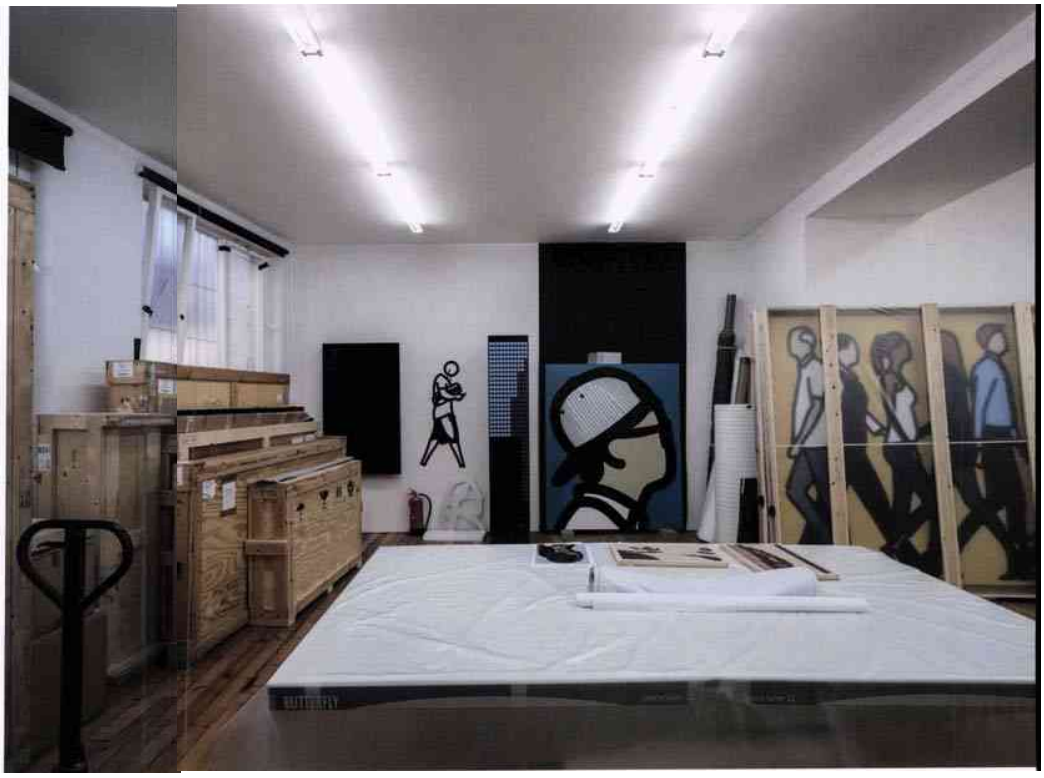
Their work often straddles creative disciplines and they are fascinated by artists' take on the environment, built and otherwise. 'Artists have very precise ways of seeing and experiencing the world, which enriches the discussion of what an architectural project can be,' explain the architects. 'We also admire artists' ability to maintain a conceptual clarity throughout a body of work. Making exhibitions for fine art or museum collections has always been a great source of research for the studio. It forces us to think of how to make sense of our culture and our times.'

The Opie studio project called for a complete reimagining and extension of the four-level, mid-19th-century brick building, increasing space while safeguarding privacy. The architects' solution was topping the existing industrial building with a profiled anodised aluminium sheet structure that captures and reflects daylight. The new design's skylights ensure the studio's creative operations remain out of sight from its neighbour, while light can flood in.

There is a playful contrast between brick and aluminium, a nod to the architects' ongoing interest in material experimentation. Their choices always respond to each project's needs, so there's huge variety in their work, from the structural bricks of the 2016 Highgate House, to the sculptural concrete volumes of a house and studio in Lambeth, one of their upcoming works. 'We like to manipulate materials and light in a way that increases your awareness of your surroundings,' says Groarke.

Inside, working with the building's original character was important to Opie. 'I did not want to lose the inherent mid-19th-century industrial qualities that remained; the wooden floors and beams, the steep, open staircases and tall windows,' he says. The architects obliged, employing a soft touch and some skilful architectural handling. Any new floorboards are reclaimed, the roof and external openings were maintained and, while the interior was almost completely gutted and cleared from additions and tweaks spanning decades, the current composition feels remarkably organic and natural. The steel-beam addition at the back manages discreetly to increase overall floorspace by some 100 sq m.

Each floor was opened up to create spacious studio rooms and open-plan desk areas, and circulation was



ABOVE LEFT, OPIE'S COLLECTION OF EGYPTIAN ARTEFACTS INCLUDES, FROM LEFT, A STATUETTE OF KNEELING MAN (C 2000-1800 BC); FAIENCE BEAD MASKS FROM THE ROMAN PERIOD; A STATUETTE OF PTAH SOKAR OSIRIS (C 660-500 BC); AND LIMESTONE RELIEF PANELS

ABOVE, IN OPIE'S STUDIO, FROM LEFT, THE ARTIST'S *BEACH TOWEL* METAL WALL DRAWING (2017); *TOWER* SCULPTURE (2017); AND *BASEBALL CAP BOY* (2016) AND *WALKING IN HACKNEY 8* (2016) VINYL PAINTINGS

Photography: Johan Dehlin for Carmody Groarke

streamlined. Hints to the building's past live/work use were carefully removed, and domestic areas were transformed into functional workspaces – the place is usually buzzing with up to ten employees.

Opie's studio is just coming out of a busy period with the opening last year of two major solo exhibitions – one in Suwon, South Korea, and the other at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Next up are shows at London's Alan Cristea Gallery in April, and at Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria in November. Careful planning of the layout was essential in order to boost efficacy during the most demanding times.

The architects have been just as busy. They are currently putting the finishing touches to a summer pavilion for the White Cube gallery at Glyndebourne in East Sussex and working on a spectacular new suite for the Burgh Island Hotel in Devon. One of their largest buildings to date, the Windermere Jetty Museum, will open later in 2018, while future work includes the renovation and extension of the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester and the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester.

But for now, they can enjoy the appreciation of a satisfied customer. Opie, meanwhile, hopes his new studio will provide a model for other developments in his area. 'We deal with the building almost exclusively from the front and inside, and the new extension exterior is at the back in a narrow, graffiti-covered alley,' says Opie. 'I only recently went out there to take a look and I am proud of how my building looks both cared for and dynamic and ready for work. It's a good mix of 19th- and 21st-century industrial functional design with no frills but with good materials and sensible generous proportions. It looks like much of the street will soon follow suit.' ★

*carmodygroarke.com; julianopie.com*

**JULIAN OPIE**

Minimalist portraitist Opie reduces his subjects to thick black outlines and planes of colours, a concise approach that somehow renders them absolutely alive. Born in 1958, the artist made his name with a series of steel sculptures in the 1980s; two decades later, his cover for Blur's *Best Of* album became an instant, and much imitated, classic. Opie's work also includes LED projections and 3D-printed busts, while his influences range from hieroglyphs to the work of Michael Craig-Martin, his tutor at Goldsmith College.

*Evening Standard*
2 August 2017

London Evening Standard

**Legacy:** Opie's new works will go on show with Van Dyck's self-portrait, inset

# Opie in frame to welcome the return of £10m Van Dyck

**Robert Dex** Arts Correspondent

JULIAN OPIE has created a series of new works to welcome Van Dyck's celebrated self-portrait back to London, three years after it was saved for the nation following a high-profile fundraising campaign.

The 17th-century work will go on show at the National Portrait Gallery from October with paintings by Opie, whose trademark style is familiar to millions of music fans after he designed the cover of Blur's greatest hits compilation in 2000.

The self-portrait has been on a UK-wide tour since it was bought for £10 million in 2014, with almost £1.5 million in public donations.

Catharine MacLeod, the gallery's senior curator of 17th-century portraits, said placing the two artists' works together showed the influence of Van Dyck on Opie and the great court painter's "lasting legacy in Britain".

■ Julian Opie After Van Dyck is at the National Portrait Gallery from October 6 to January 7.

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian, UK
21st May 2014
Page 13

# Ancient and modern: Opie creations come face to face with his own private collection

## Big differences between old and the new make similarities more intriguing

**Mark Brown**
**Arts correspondent**

Julian Opie is best known for his ultra-modern portraits with thick black lines and very little detail. So it may surprise museum visitors to see he is a keen collector of grand 17th and 18th century paintings packed full of frilly and intricate fussiness.

The secret passions of Opie are explored in a fascinating exhibition opening today at the Holburne Museum in Bath in which the artist displays examples of his own work from the past 20 years with works from his private collection. That collection includes portraits by Sir Peter Lely, Joshua Reynolds and George Romney, and ancient sculpture from Egypt and Rome.

It is Opie's first show in a UK museum for 10 years and the artist said he thought long and hard about whether to do it. "I was anxious about how it could be read and what it could mean. I have seen examples of, say, a contemporary work next to a Vermeer and it's just, 'No, it doesn't really help either'. I hope it will be read generously, rather than 'that lot's better than that lot'."

The Holburne's director, Xa Sturgis, said the theme was a natural fit for his museum. "What I like is that I've never seen anything like it. I hope that is a good thing. It is slightly provocative; it provokes thought and looking, and that is always key with exhibitions."

Opie has divided the gallery space in half - his works on one side, his collection on the other. It looks and feels different to what we are used to with old master portraits hung on white walls with natural light streaming through.

Opie hopes visitors will make connections, perhaps go around and go back to different works. Yes, they are very different but perhaps they are also similar.

"With old masters there is a slight tendency to go, 'Wow, look at that amazing craft', and it seems to be outside anybody's imagination quite how the flowers are painted. But actually it was a fairly standardised system as to how to do cloth, how to do flesh and so on. People would have learned it in workshops."

Opie has always used the latest technology so it is perhaps no surprise to see works from 2012 where he has explored 3D printing.

Two larger-than-life busts sit on plinths created using a 3D printer - hand-painted because the technology does not yet allow colour. Opie said he had not hand-painted for a long time but was helped by a 2,000 year old Egyptian funerary mask from the late Ptolomeic period that is in his collection.

"I often run out of nerve. I think, 'I can't do this', and my hand is shaking and I think I need my glasses," he said. "The idea of what I'm doing ... it makes me nervous." So it helped to look at his mask and think some bloke in Egypt on a Wednesday afternoon sat down and did a whole load of them. "If he can do it then I can do it."

Some visitors will be able to spot more direct connections. The blue curtains in a portrait of an unknown woman by Cornelius Johnson - a court painter to Charles I before Van Dyck - inspired the blue curtains in a 2008 Opie work, Maria Teresa with sequinned dress. Opie said he often used the poses of sitters in old masters as templates for his own works.

Many of his collected works are on display in his east London converted warehouse studio. "I find myself feeding off them as I'm working. You never know what you need or will find, so I do learn a lot."

There are many wonderful and striking works in Opie's collection, not least a bust of the 18th-century composer Christoph Gluck from the studio of Jean-

**Xa Sturgis studies the finish on the two larger than life 3D-printed busts that form part of the exhibition at the Holburne gallery of works created by, or collected by, Julian Opie (below)**
Photograph: Adrian Sherratt for the Guardian

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26th April 2012

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# Julian Opie: A New Calgary Stroll

EAST VILLAGE, CALGARY APRIL 26 2012

by NANCY TOUSLEY

Julian Opie *Promenade* 2012 Installation view / photo Kris Emmerson

The new kids on the block in Calgary—Jeremy, Jennifer, Rod, Tina, Verity and Kris—arrived here in the entourage of the British artist Julian Opie, who is a Londoner, and stayed behind after he left a week ago for home. They are now permanent residents, out doing what city dwellers do—walking on the streets. However, they do not blend in with the crowd. They stride above it, suspended paradoxically in a state of perpetual motion.

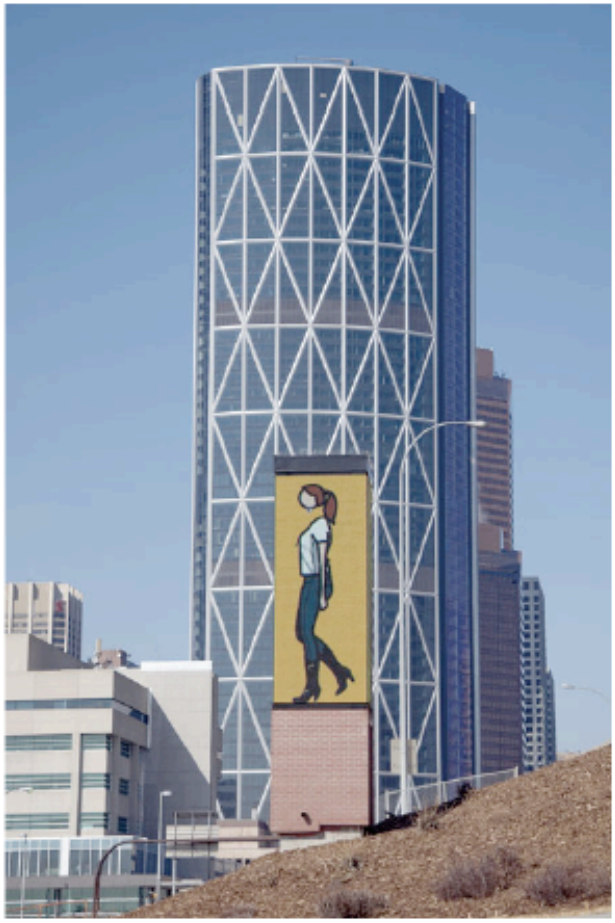
In the urban landscape, movement, light and colour are what immediately attract the eye to their presence. Opie's animated walking figures, rendered with minimal detail in the black line drawing that is a hallmark of the artist's style, occupy a 24-foot-high, four-sided LED tower on the gritty edge of the downtown and Calgary's East Village, a 49-acre district with river frontage that is now under development. The sculpture, a $650,000 commission by the Calgary Municipal Land Development Corporation for its Art in the Public Realm program, is called *Promenade*.

The first of two permanent artworks commissioned for the development, it's on a patch of turf that, for the moment, is populated by gophers and jackrabbits, but will soon be graded and landscaped with junipers. Opie's work was chosen from 10 proposals submitted to a competition by Canadian and international artists. Unlike most public art, *Promenade* has preceded the condos and apartment buildings that will be going up nearby. The artwork is, in fact, attracting investors to the area, says Susan Veres, CMLC vice-president of marketing communications.

Passersby on the street have clear views of the tower's LED screens from the corridor of 4th Street S.E. and the flyover at 5th Avenue S.E. and, indeed, from north, south, east or west, as they walk or drive past, in the daytime or at night. The flat screens, which are brightest when viewed head on, are oriented to the cardinal points on the compass. Their background colour is yellow, against which Opie's graphic figures are garbed in red, blue, black, white and grey. Although they constitute an urban social group—pedestrians—each faceless figure, which has a circle for a head that bobs slightly above its neckless shoulders, is an individual, walking with a characteristic gait and at a different speed. Each of them appears, almost magically, to be turning the corners and walking around the tower in a continuous flow of movement.

Opie has said that although there are more sophisticated systems for showing moving images, “LEDs allow you to see the still LEDs turn on and off while you see flowing movement at the same time. For me, this is exciting and the basis of the perception of movement.”

The figures seem to turn the corners, he says, because “the computer understands it as a flat screen, with four sides. As one figure disappears off the left of the flat screen, the same figure is coming in on the right. What it then appears to be is a sort of lighthouse effect: the figures are constantly walking around [the tower]. Because they are all walking at their own pace, they slightly overtake each other. One guy is a little faster than the others, so there are periods where they are all grouped together in a bunch and then they open up again. ”



Julian Opie Promenade 2012 Installation view / photo Kris Emmerson

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# 'I'm not sure what art is'

## Known for slick images like his portrait of Blur, Julian Opie is now the subject of a major retrospective. He takes **Stuart Jeffries** through it

One evening, Julian Opie went to a Soho strip club. He had a pole in his studio and needed a dancer. "I'd bought the pole on the internet," Opie says, as takes me around a new retrospective of his work. "I thought I could get more dynamic poses from models."

What was he looking for? "Someone who danced well." A stripper called Shahnoza, originally from Tehran, fitted the bill and, a few days later, she arrived at Opie's east London studio with various outfits and her own music. For the next two days, Opie took more than 2,000 photographs and filmed as she danced and stripped.

Opie had been commissioned to make a series of drawings for the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. He decided his Shahnoza pictures would appear on the walls of a room full of Henry Moore sculptures, mostly reclining nudes: "I wanted to complement and contrast with the imposing, sedate and serious white sculptures," he explains.

Opie made the pictures by drawing, with his computer, over digital images of Shahnoza. He then emailed these to a vinyl-cutter in Canada who turned them into stickybacked plastic shapes that were stuck to the gallery walls. Moore's nudes sit on plinths, while giant images of Shahnoza now slink around the walls, pulling off her knickers in one pose. Her head was reduced to a simple circle - a customary Opie riff that, in this context, seemed to allude to Moore's trademark holes.

Opie has often made such artistic rejoinders. As a student at Goldsmith's in London, he copied famous artworks for a series called Eat Dirt, Art History. He'd draw an El Greco very loosely and write underneath it: "Eat Dirt El Greco." As he told an interviewer: "It was an acknowledgement of the hopeless position of the art student in light of art history, but also a rallying call not to feel overwhelmed by it."

Opie, born in London in 1958, graduated in the early 1980s, a generation before the likes of Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin arrived. He revelled in the punk sensibility of the time, the rebellion against tradition. He denies, however, any lewd intent with his This is Shahnoza series. "I don't start with an agenda - it's possible to start that way, but I don't."

Instead, he says, he sets out to strip things down, the purpose being to reflect and play on not just other art, but on the artifice that he thinks frames contemporary experience: how what is seemingly natural in human behaviour is made up of learned performance codes, how artistic conventions constrain artistic practice. But why a poledancer doing a striptease? "I don't take responsibility for what's out there, but I use it nonetheless."

This is Shahnoza exemplifies many Opie themes: engagement with art history, use of new technology, obsession with the human body. It also shows how Opie loves to work with one idea across different media. Shahnoza has now been immortalised in painting, granite, silkscreen and LED animation (in which she dances in bra and pants or in skimpy white dress). In at least one portrait, her head is represented by something other than a circle. But even then, she's still stripped down: the schematic image of her face in flat colours and minimal detail is poised between generic and particular. She's more Opie than Shahnoza.

The drawings appear in a new catalogue published by the Alan Cristea gallery in London, to go with the Opie retrospective it has just opened. Called Editions 1984-2011, the show charts Opie's development from early reductive landscapes and portraits, to silhouettes, animations, lenticulars, LCD and LED animations. For all this, Opie may be best known for his blandly homogenised portrait of Blur for the cover of their 2000 The Best Of album.

Does he ever find this array of possible media discombobulating? After all, in a interview for an exhibition of Utagawa Hiroshige woodblock prints he curated in 2008, he seemed envious of the narrow range of options available to his hero, the 19th-century Japanese artist: "I think Hiroshige would have had much more of a sense of what his role was and what the job entailed. Now who knows what an artist should do?"

"I still feel that," he says now, as we stand in front of his 2009 work View of Mount Fuji with Daisies from Route 300. "For artists at art school, the freedom must be a burden. There's no tradition of bronze or oil painting, no tradition you can embed yourself in - which was what Hiroshige was able to do. At the same time, I relish the range of options available because I don't want to be tied down. I want to embrace good-looking options."

Like Shahnoza, this Japanese landscape also comes in different

media. The version we're looking at is made of lenticular panels that waver as you walk by, creating a sense of both depth and movement. But there is also a computer animation of the same scene: depending on which programme is running, either a flock of birds fly across the picture, or the daisies gently flutter. Does he write the programmes himself? "No. I used to physically construct all of my work. Now I prefer being a conductor. I go round my studio getting the inkjet printer guy or the algorithm guy to do my bidding."

We move to some silhouettes he made of himself. Before photography, silhouette profiles, cut from black card, were the cheapest way of recording a person's appearance. "It's a purportedly obsolete and vulgar art form. It surprises me that I care about it. I used to have a stricter idea of what art was. Now I feel much less sure. I'm not really sure what art is."

Next is a 2001 marble piece called Remember Her This Way (Lying). The blocks of marble are engraved with the outline of a female nude with a bubble head. It was made for Opie by Elfes, a firm of Jewish monumental masons: Opie had become entranced by some engraved stone he saw in their old showroom on Brick Lane every time he visited the Whitechapel gallery nearby. What was the appeal? "It's an ancient and permanent way of drawing. The line is cut and sandblasted out and the groove filled with hand-hammered lead."

Didn't the masons baulk at such a sleazy-seeming commission? "Not at all. But plenty of other people have self-censoring compunctions about my work. Most of my problems are with public bodies, which is a shame because I am committed to making public sculptures. In Soho, I had a problem with an image of a nude woman I wanted to put up, which amazed me. You can't move in that area for nude figures. That one on the corner of Hyde Park with the very pert bottom, for instance." He may well mean Richard Westmacott's 1822 nude sculpture of Achilles. "In America, it's a nightmare. You can't have figures smoking, and they're very uncomfortable about depicting a figure's race."

He is currently struggling to get funding for a public sculpture of 3-metre-high figures that will take an LED walk over the Thames via Hungerford Bridge. Why is he so interested in movement? "Have you ever seen a dead body? It's the most freaky thing to see the human body at rest. Movement is the fourth dimension in art. In painting, movement is implied – say, in the drapery. In my picture of a Formula One driver, it's implied, too. The road is temptingly there. It was inspired by computer-game landscapes. I'm creating the illusion of movement."

Opie finds women easier to pose than men, he says. "Men are perhaps not intrinsically easy to look at, or are less easy about being looked at and need to be doing something." That's why, when he drew Bryan Adams, he had him holding a guitar. And that's why, he suggests, Warhol's Elvis has a gun. Women don't need such accessories when Opie draws them, although he's not sure why. "Is it the viewer, or the viewed, or the artist? I don't know. I go by trial and error. If it works, I follow it up. If I see something in the world that sings, I grab it."

Julian Opie: Editions 1984-2011 is at the Alan Cristea Gallery, London W1 (020-7439 1866), until 9 July.

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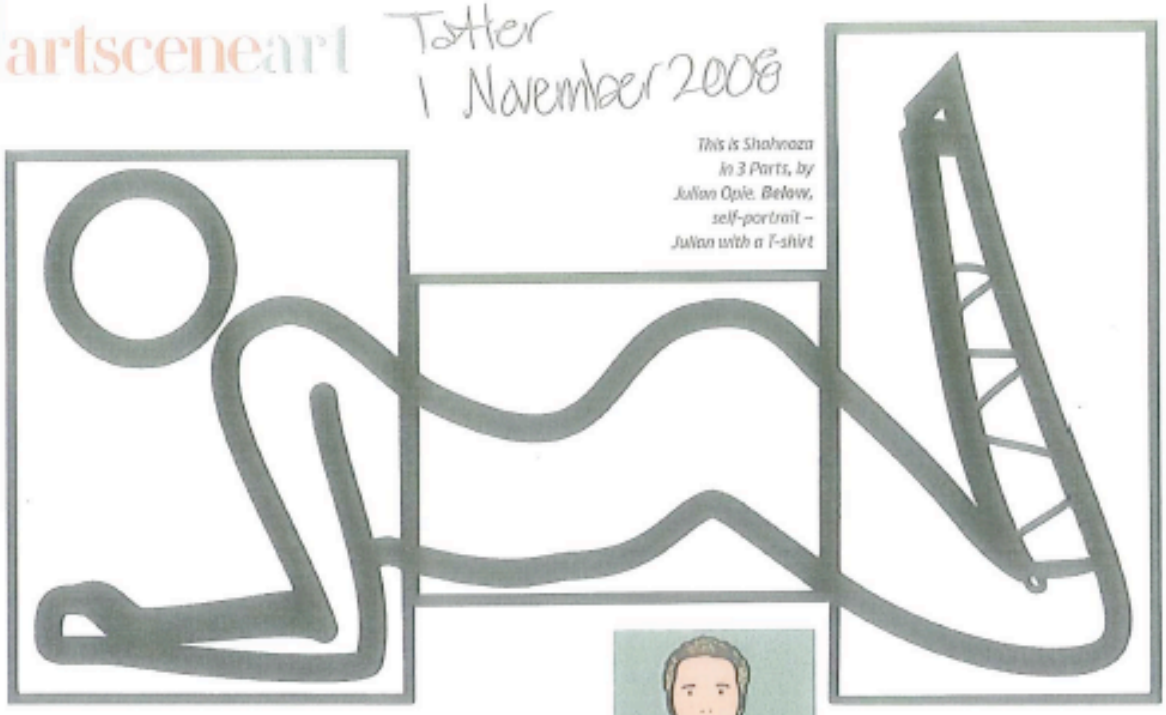

*This is Shahnoza in 3 Parts, by Julian Opie. Below, self-portrait – Julian with a T-shirt*

# Opie of the masses

Pop-art star Julian Opie's work sure draws the crowds, says Olivia Cole

Meeting Julian Opie is like taking a trip. While looking at a Shoreditch road he suggests pretending that the cars swirling around Old Street are a beautiful river and the crowds of people are cows. 'It's not easy, but you can do it.' How nice to live in a head where, in a blink, you can retreat into Technicolor.

Julian Opie has always been an artist with a clearly mapped-out vision. As an art student at Goldsmiths, he amused everyone by drawing graffiti with slogans like 'Eat Dirt El Greco!' – a sign of his determination to grab himself a large slice of art history.

He did this straight after graduating, in true enfant-terrible style, showing in London and Europe, and had a solo exhibition at the Hayward aged 34. He's now Hoxton's answer to Warhol: a pop-y portraitist who, it seems, gets whoever he wants to sit. Rock stars from Blur to Bryan Adams queued to see cartoon versions of themselves. Blur's portraits are on the cover of their *Best of Blur* album, while Alex James used his on the cover of his autobiography.

The National Portrait Gallery recently bought an Opie self-portrait that was partly inspired, he says, by Lara Croft's movements in *Tomb Raider*. No wonder Damien Hirst says it was Opie who inspired him to take the art scene by storm and on his own terms. Based on traditional drawings, painstakingly developed using new technology, Opie's art reflects life as it's experienced now – at high speed on billboards, laptops, BlackBerries and camera phones. His work is instantly recognisable. Now 49, he's shown all over the world – at major museums in Japan and on the side of the Met in New York. One of his dancers is currently springing up all over the Tube in London. His work is playfully teasing in its simplicity. His slinky films of people walking, dancing (Shahnoza, a pole dancer) and undressing have to be the sexiest animations since Jessica Rabbit.

For his latest work, he's looked at high fashion. Whereas before his pictures have been very plain, now earrings glint, sequins shimmer and doe-eyes occasionally blink. The subjects are clad in sumptuous Dolce & Gabbana couture while the settings and style echo 18th-century portraits by Reynolds and Gainsborough (glimmering backgrounds of clouds, water and birds). For work by someone fascinated with Japan and America, these are very English in style: 'This is what culture does – it keeps bouncing around back and forth. I always thought English art was slightly embarrassing but that was just ignorance.' In each of the portraits some elements are 3D, and the backgrounds, which initially look still, are full of tiny movements.

**Normal life has been his main obsession**

Yet despite this more embellished slant, normal life has been his main obsession. He claims his famous sitters were almost accidents. And though most artists would kill to have Kate Moss in their studio as a muse, Opie says it was the idea of a collector (who now owns the work) and he was too nervous to make the most of it: 'I just did my usual thing – shooting her face from every angle. She then said, "Is that it?" Then Bryan Adams was sitting for me. I was at his place and he said, "Kate Moss posed naked on that rug last week." I was, like, my God.' It's the demure quality of his Moss portrait that makes it stand out.

Works for his shows are all over his studio. In pride of place is a deep-blue silkscreen of his wife swimming. 'I drew it sitting on the bottom of the pool with a rock on my lap. I'm good at holding my breath.' He and his wife – a part-time muse – have four children between them and he admits to being nervous about his teenager Elena's fondness for sleepovers at the studio. These days, it's the kind of admission to make an art insurer or the Tate's Nicholas Serota (one of Opie's biggest cheerleaders) pass out. □

*Julian Opie shows at the Lisson Gallery, NW1 (tel: 020 7724 2739), 15 Oct–15 Nov, and at Alan Cristea, W1 (tel: 020 7439 1866), 13 Oct–15 Nov.*