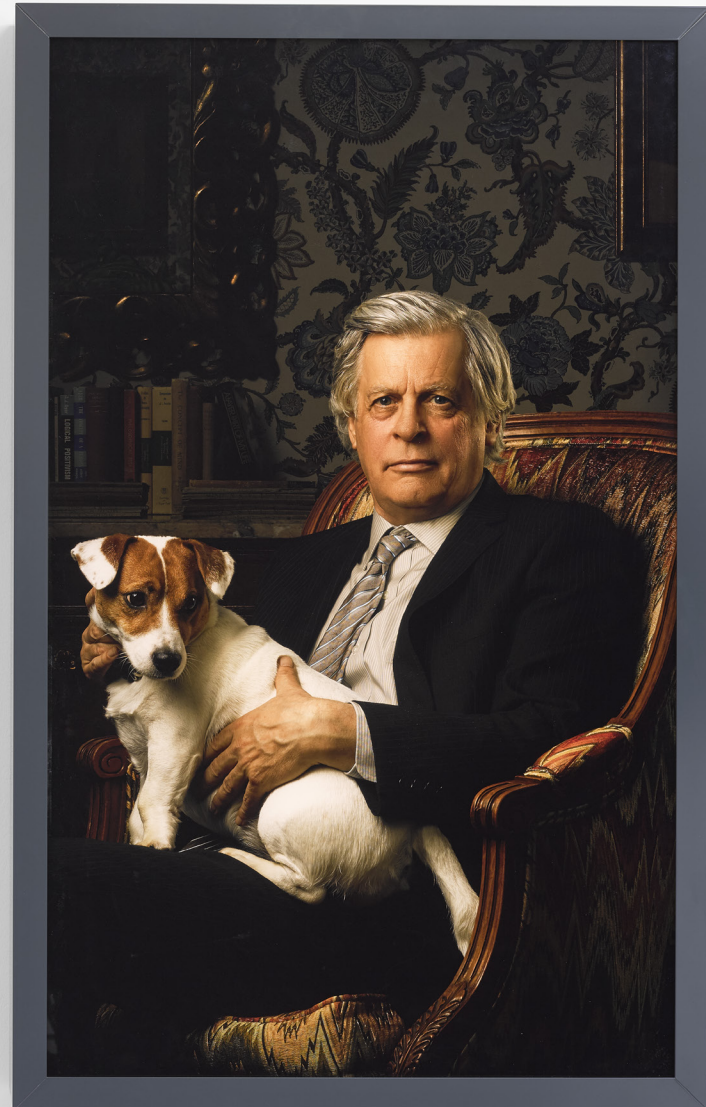
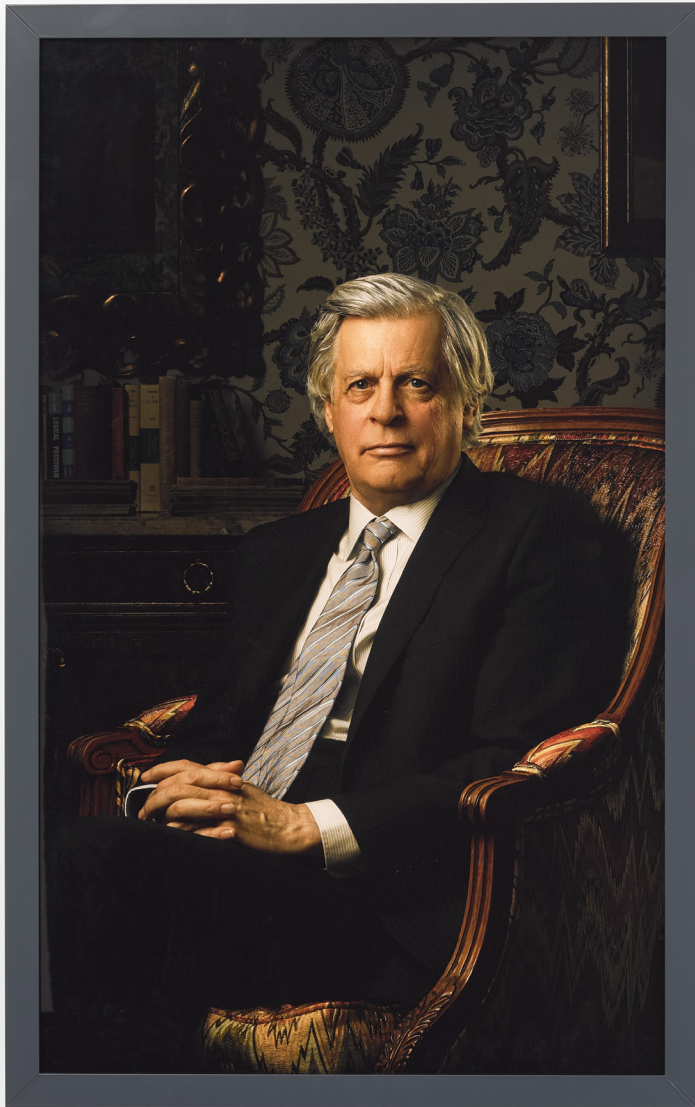


Rodney Graham
Central Questions of Philosophy

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y



The Central Questions of Philosophy, 2018
Two painted aluminium lightboxes with transmounted chromogenic transparencies
117 x 91.4 cm (each)
46 1/8 x 36 in (each)



For over forty years Graham has pursued a conceptual, multi-disciplinary practice that encompasses photography, sculpture, installation, books, film, video, audio and painting to explore past and present possibilities of creativity. Fundamentally a performance artist, Graham's art proceeds from disguise and digression, through quotation and humour, towards an understanding of place within culture and time.

Rodney Graham's exhibition at Lisson Gallery London, entitled 'The Central Questions of Philosophy', explores Graham's 'performative self' through a series of photographic stage sets, related paintings and objects, as well as a subtext relating to the fugitive nature of perception and artistic sleight of hand. 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, but present an accumulation of multi-layered fictions, with Graham consistently playing the starring role. The exchange and engagement between artist, spectator and avatar combine to such an extent that these relative positions become fluid, roles reverse and different realities are reflected and refracted.

Over a decade on from producing his first lightbox in 2007, Graham poses as an intellectual figure for a pair of formal photographic portraits, 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* of 1973, 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, mirroring the two extant covers of his original book. A third and fourth image in another diptych by Graham shows just the dog and then an empty chair, suggesting an absence and a focus on the upholstered *bergère confessionale*, literally a confessional chair where the priest is hidden from the confessor.

The work further 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 lightboxes, 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, although breaks with Ayer's staunch empiricism by replacing the sitter with an imposter, an actor or a ghost of the past (Ayer himself was an MI6 agent and Special Operations Executive during World War II).



Tattooed Man on Balcony, 2018
Painted aluminum lightbox with transmounted chromogenic transparency
305 x 183 cm (each)
120 1/8 x 72 in (each)

Since the 1990s, Graham has appeared in his own work in any number of guises: lighthouse keeper, photo developer, cowboy, musician, gambler, cook, teacher, critic, plasterer, hermit and of course, as artist. In *Tattooed Man on a Balcony* (2018), Graham morphs himself into a burly hipster on a balcony, seemingly contemplating his own place in the world – a philosophical, querulous pose that he shares with many of these pseudo-self portraits in this ongoing, loosely connected series.

Rather than exercises in navel-gazing or false depictions of some ‘everyman’ figure, Graham switches roles so as to inhabit specific historical characters or extend private observations through fictional individuals. In this instance, Graham’s protagonist recalls the kind of ageing Rockabilly persona whose hell-raising days might be well behind him, but are still visibly represented through his profuse body art.

Graham notes that, “A few years ago I wrote a poem in the style of Stephane Mallarmé that was intended as an instructional guide for a tattoo artist and described a tattoo I wished to be realized on my back: an image of the comic book figure Popeye, in a deep sea diving suit fighting a giant squid.” Indeed this work *To the Tattooist* (2010) is a deluxe vanity press edition of a poem addressed to a tattoo artist in the style of the typographic innovations of Mallarmé’s *Coup de Des*. The slippage from language – whether poem, song or book – to object, is evident not only in the translation of Ayer’s book cover into personage, but in the use of comic-book iconography or sailor’s slogans transferred to Graham’s body.

Each of this man’s tattoos actually refers back to the classic *Thimble Theatre* cartoons by E.C. Segar, the inventor of the Popeye comic strip that included other iconic characters such as Olive Oyl, Wimpy, the Sea Hag, King Blozo and Bluto among others. Cartoons make frequent appearances in Graham’s work and the frames of a typical newspaper strip are not dissimilar to the framing devices of the lightboxes employed by Graham over the last three decades.

Apart from his own aesthetic and intellectual transformations, Graham renders each environment in immaculate detail, here drawing attention to an almost cinematic recreation of an architectural feature of his hometown: “Driving around Vancouver I have seen many characters like this idling on balconies. The building is of a type quite specific to Vancouver – it is what is called a ‘Vancouver Special’ – a sturdy and cheap modernist house of between one to three bedrooms, built in Vancouver and the suburbs from the Sixties to the Eighties. I modelled my set on a pristine example.”





Vacuuming the Gallery 1949, 2018
Four painted aluminium lightboxes with transmounted chromogenic transparencies
244 x 183 cm (each)
96 1/8 x 72 in (each)



Graham's exhibition at Lisson Gallery features his largest lightbox to date, a four-panel piece featuring a 1940s gallery scene, loosely based on a photograph of Samuel Kootz. In the original photograph, Kootz, one of the first New York art dealers to champion Abstract Expressionist art, 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 four-part 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, all presented as an artwork in his own solo show.

While Graham has previously questioned the roles expected of an artist, in works such as *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 from another time, showing traces of history that resonate with art galleries today. A number of new paintings in an abstract style, like those featured in *Vacuuming the Gallery 1949*, are also on view, 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.

In a painstaking process, not dissimilar to the travails expended through the exertion and dexterity of the typically tortured painter, working away alone and late into the night, Graham's new body of paintings has matured over a long period of experimentation. Beginning with one abstract composition by Alexander Rodchenko painted in gouache in 1941, Graham began his own related series, replaying and reciting the first image in oil paint and sand on gessoed canvas. Then further portions of those works were excised and reassembled by Graham in Photoshop, only to be re-realised as new paintings and cut up again, repeating the process – complete with digital glitches – seemingly ad infinitum.

Left: *Untitled (detail)* 2018, oil and sand on canvas



Untitled, 2018
Oil and sand on canvas
185.4 x 276.8 cm (framed)
73 x 109 in (framed)



In the upstairs gallery at 27 Bell Street is a multipartite work by Graham from 2014, entitled *Black Tapestry*, which comprises 24 framed copies of Carole King's 1971 album, *Tapestry*, each of which having been modified by Graham with layers of coloured inks, progressively darkening towards near blackness. On the title track, King sings of a figure in grey who only comes to her "in times of deepest darkness... he's come to take me back, he's come to take me back."

The photograph of King posing with her cat Telemachus sat in the window of her home in Laurel Canyon (perhaps nodding next door to the dog in A.J. Ayer's portrait), also shows her own handiwork in the form of a tapestry she is working on, while Graham's over-painting threatens to obliterate the entire scene and turn each image into a monochrome. Graham has previously taken 100 album covers to create 100 monochrome paintings, but here the mottled surface of the original cover released through Ode Records – using a stock that resembles watercolour paper or parchment – absorbs the washes and strokes of ink in such a way as to create a new reading of each successive defacement. Later copies of the album, not original Ode Records pressings, had more glossy covers and consequently resist the absorption.

Apart from his own prodigious musical output, both with various bands over the years and as a solo artist, Rodney Graham has worked on a collaborative film and performance work with Dan Graham, entitled *Don't Trust Anyone Over 30*, for which he has also designed the soundtrack's album cover art. Rodney Graham will also perform songs in Dan Graham's concurrent exhibition 'Rock 'n' Roll', within the glass-and-steel pavilion titled in homage to the late avant-garde composer and musician Glenn Branca: *Stage Set for Music no 2 for Glenn* (2018).

Left: *Black Tapestry*, 2014 (detail), 24 copies of Carole King's 1971 album *Tapestry* over-painted in coloured ink



In the ersatz drawing room created in the upstairs gallery by Graham, lies a green-baize card table at the centre of a new work, *Spring-Loaded Silver Slipcase for Robinson Crusoe* (2018), alongside its accompanying film. This complex multimedia installation comprises a solid silver slipcase for a rare copy of the first Arabic translation of Robinson Crusoe placed on top of a regency gaming table. The custom-built slipcase is spring-loaded and ejects the book when a button is pressed. A short 16mm film on a loop sees Graham leafing through the book, dwelling on its numerous engraved illustrations and finally demonstrating how the mechanism works.

The early engravings within the book reveal a dishevelled Crusoe lost in his lonely landscape, mirroring many of Graham's solitary doppelgänger, such as the leaping hermit or lighthouse keeper, not to mention his most famous tragicomic loner – the shipwrecked sailor who knocks himself out over and over again by shaking a coconut out of a tree – as featured in the looping film *Vexation Island* (1997). In this new work, Graham could also be described to be set adrift in the foreign land of the Arabic script, while nevertheless engaged in a solemn study of this gnomonic text.

The existence of this rare book came to Graham's attention through his friend and frequent collaborator in Brussels, Yves Gevaert, who is a publisher, bibliophile and collector. In fact, Graham's first show with Lisson Gallery in 1990 was entitled 'Books' and included a number of titles by Edgar Allen Poe, Sigmund Freud and Ferdinand de Saussure, which were also sourced by Gevaert and presented in handcrafted wooden or leather slipcases. Similarly, those texts were not displayed to be read, rather they were to be regarded as fetishised objects, divested from their original function. At the heart of this is Graham's own interest in unconventional authorship, as set out by writers such as Raymond Roussel, a writer celebrated by the Surrealists and Dadaists in the same breath as Lautréamont and Mallarmé.

Left: *Spring-Loaded Silver Slipcase for Robinson Crusoe*, 2018 (detail)

Also exhibited in the upstairs study room is a small lightbox of an ornamental telephone set atop the artist's studio table, entitled *Unused Prop: French Telephone* (2018). The overly decorative telephone pictured is also an example of faux-French fakery but relates to a famous scene in one of Graham's favourite films, *The King of Comedy* (1983), in which Jerry Lewis is kidnapped by a hapless Robert De Niro and Sandra Bernhard. Lewis, at gun point, picks up the Frenchified phone to read out his capturers' ridiculous ransom demands.

Across from the grilled frontage of *Tattooed Man on a Balcony* stands an exact replica of Elvis Presley's aluminium screen door at his home in Graceland, fabricated in silver. The original, which was removed in 1968, was left in storage and then sold at auction in Las Vegas in 1999, along with other domestic items such as a bible, a handgun and a Texaco credit card, all belonging to Presley. Graham takes this ubiquitous American object and fashions it into a giant shimmering piece of history, the *Screen Door* (2005) itself a re-imagining or recreation in a similar vein to his photographic *mise-en-scènes*.

About Rodney Graham

Rodney Graham was born in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada in 1949. He lives and works in Vancouver. Solo shows 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); 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 shows 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 Lyon Biennale, France (2003). He represented Canada at the 47th Venice Biennale, Italy (1997) and 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 an Officer of the Order of Canada for his contributions to Canadian contemporary art.



Right: *Screen Door*, 2005