

Press Release

Julian Opie

4 May – 12 June 2021
22 Cork Street, London

In a new body of work at Lisson Gallery's Mayfair space, Julian Opie combines two subjects that have been central to his artistic career: people and architecture. Through a series of group portraits alongside an installation of contemporary tower blocks, the exhibition depicts the interconnectivity of the urban environment, be it the commuters criss-crossing through the streets or the overlaid housing units of a typically overpopulated city. Few artists have captured the modern world as consistently and convincingly as Opie; here we experience the complexity of the cosmopolitan city through Opie's radical, simplified style: a particularly poignant scene considering the rare isolation on the streets at the time of the exhibition's conception.

The viewer approaches the gallery through a colourful overlay of apartment blocks. These buildings – presented in vinyl on the front windows of the gallery – vary in size and dimensions, and through remarkably little detail are able to encapsulate the essence of these high and low-rise developments familiar to anyone who has spent time in a city. Just as with his figures, Opie highlights the individuality of each, whilst commenting on the homogeneity of the urban landscape. Through the lattice of the vinyl, the city's commuters are revealed in the space beyond, walking independently but together as one.

Four life-size group portraits inhabit the space between the buildings. Of these, two stand directly on the floor, leaning against the wall, and two are suspended higher on the wall. The figures were all captured – initially in digital photography and then drawn on the computer – in London in 2020. The individuals appear as if to stride across the space, each moving in their own purposeful way to their destination. The visual rhythm of the works, achieved through the dynamic compositions, comes alive with the presence of an audience. The artist's bold representations are founded upon social observation, which has remained at the heart of his practice and is evidently present in even his earliest work. By recording people in cities around him, Opie observes society at a profound level and endeavours to decode the world.

The backdrop of the scene is an additional set of skyscrapers, located on the far wall of the gallery. The tower blocks comprise overlaying aluminium sheets which are leant on the wall. Through this process of leaning – a dynamic and interchangeable act that is by nature unstable – a three-dimensional experience can be produced through planar objects. The material then inhabits both the space of the work and that of the viewer: a point where material becomes image and sculpture becomes painting. With the use of a pure colour for each building against the white of the wall behind, Opie plays with flatness and illusion, producing the implication of windows, of balconies, of doors. The image of the city is produced through the combination of materials and colours – aluminium, car paint, and a play of gloss and matt surfaces – which intuitively trigger the references. Having lived in London since studying at Goldsmiths, Opie has been inspired by the way this labyrinth of shapes and structures, automatically recognisable without any need for thought or interpretation, make up a modern town or city.

Following the exhibition this summer, Opie will present a new body of work at a solo show at Pitzhanger Manor, the country home of, and designed by, Sir John Soane. The exhibition will feature a series of site-specific pieces, focusing on architecture, people and nature. The centrepiece of the show will be the representation of a French village landscape in a variety of media, inviting the visitor to circulate through imaginary spaces from multiple viewpoints. The exhibition will be complemented by artworks in the public grounds outside the front of the Manor and facing Walpole Park at the rear – the first exhibition programmed both in the gallery and outdoors.

About the artist

The work of Julian Opie is known throughout the world. With public commissions from New York to Seoul, London to Zurich, and an uninterrupted flow of international museum exhibitions, Opie's distinctive formal language is instantly recognisable and reflects his artistic preoccupation with the idea of representation and the means by which images are perceived and understood. "Everything you see is a trick of the light," Opie writes. "Light bouncing into your eye, light casting shadows, creating depth, shapes, colours. Turn off the light and it's all gone. We use vision as a means of survival and it's essential to take it for granted in order to function, but awareness allows us to look at looking and by extension look at ourselves and be aware of our presence. Drawing, drawing out the way that process feels and works brings the awareness into the present and into the real world, the exterior world." Always exploring different techniques both cutting edge and ancient, Opie plays with ways of seeing through reinterpreting the vocabulary of everyday life; his reductive style evokes both a visual and spatial experience of the world around us. Drawing influence from classical portraiture, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Japanese woodblock prints, as well as public signage, information boards and traffic signs, the artist connects the clean visual language of modern life, with the fundamentals of art history.

Julian Opie was born in London in 1958 and lives and works in London. He graduated from Goldsmith's School of Art, London in 1982. Exhibitions have been staged at Berardo Museum, Lisbon, Portugal (2020); Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Japan (2019); Gerhardsen Gerner, Oslo, Norway (2019); Hyundai Department Store, Seoul, South Korea (2018); The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2018); National Portrait Gallery, London, UK (2017); Suwon Ipark Museum of Art, Korea (2017); Fosun Foundation, Shanghai, China (2017); Fundacion Bancaja, Valencia, Spain (2017); Kunsthalle Helsinki, Finland (2015); Museum of Contemporary Art Krakow (MoCAK), Poland (2014); National Portrait Gallery, London, UK (2011); IVAM, Valencia, Spain (2010); MAK, Vienna, Austria (2008); CAC Malaga, Spain (2006); Neues Museum, Nuremberg, Germany (2003); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2001); Kunstverein Hannover, Germany (1994) and Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK (1985). Major group exhibitions include 'Sculpture Milwaukee', Milwaukee, USA (2020); 'Nature in Art', MoCAK, Krakow, Poland (2019); 'I Want! I Want! Art & Technology' at Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2017); 'This Is Not The Reality. What Kind Of Reality?', 57th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2017); the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK (2016); Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK (2014); Tate Britain, London, UK (2013); the Shanghai Biennale (2006); 11th Biennial of Sydney (1998); documenta 8, Kassel, Germany (1987); and XIIème Biennale de Paris (1985). Public projects include 'Parade' and 'Running 3', Pacific Place, Hong Kong (2020); 'Walking in Shanghai', Fosun Foundation, Shanghai (2019); 'Teresa', Altice Forum, Braga, Portugal (2018); 'Walking in Taipei', Taipei, Taiwan and 'Walking in Hong Kong', Tower 535, Hong Kong (2016); Arendt & Medernach, Luxembourg (2016); Heathrow Terminal 1 (1998); and the prison Wormwood Scrubs, London (1994); as well as public work for hospitals, such as the Lindo Wing, St. Mary's Hospital, London (2012) and Barts & the London Hospital (2003). His design for the band Blur's album 'Best of Blur' (2000) was awarded the Music Week CADS for Best Illustration in 2001.

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 promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai, as well as temporary spaces opened in 2020 in East Hampton and London's Mayfair district. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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