ROOM WITH A VIEW

VISUAL ARTS

John Wood and Paul Harrison are in a strong recent tradition of artistic duos. But their work, a new exhibition of which has opened in London, is more difficult to categorise. **TOM LUBBOCK** finds a new way of looking at familiar spaces and objects.

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rich artists in the 1990s started to come into their own. The creative talents, traditionally at home in the world of art and design, were rediscovered by the visual arts. Of course there had always been Gilbert and George, founding fathers of the binary artist. But in the last decade many more pairs have appeared. Some are siblings, like the Chapman brothers and the Wilson twins. Others are couples, like Noble and Webster and Smith and Stewart. Others, too, are just friends.

**John Wood and Paul Harrison** have been collaborating for 10 years. There isn’t always absolute clarity as to what they do together. They are performance artists, so their work is always a video piece, never a live show. The look is minimalist. It partly suggests the controlled experiments of non-corporal art – but equally, the slapstick routines of physical comedy. “Sculptural primitivism” is about right. The basic Wood and Harrison ingredients are two piles of brick and a piece of string, some elementary props, a confined white room, and no audience to afford concern. Each piece shows a single, dagonal, lacquered and starting operation in three-dimensional space. The man stands there, a chair is thrown at him from high speed from off screens, but suddenly reaches the end of his trilogy steps just short and drops. He continues standing. Cut. A man stands on a chair. He does a little jump up. He comes down. On impact he cracks his back, breaks his tail. He stands there. Another phrase would be “geometrically focused.” In the shadow of Tate Modern, PA Projects is a small art space and not very easy to find. Go east from Tate along the river path towards Southwark Bridge. After the Irish theatre you come to a cobbled street, left, called Rose Garth. Though there is no apparent street sign, but the turning happens to be marked by a street sign. The green door of the building has no sign. The studio’s door is made of glass, clear. The studio is dark inside. The studio is dark inside.

Television is in art galleries nowadays, it needs a good reason to be there. In Wood and Harrison’s new work – Horizontality – they have one. It’s a matter of being in houses. Each of six television sets shows six short video programmes, and over the run of the exhibition the six videos have the same location and the same story: a small oblong studio space, viewed from directly overhead. The floor is white, the walls are grey, and the corners of the walls are out of sight. It is not possible to intersect the corners of the screen, a box inside a perfect fit. The new work is a departure. The comedy is muted, less bellowing. There’s nothing like the wild scenes shown last year, when two men sat on chairs rolling uncontrollably around the floor of a confined space, apparently subject to mysterious forces. The man’s chair was stuck in the back of a room in motion. In Horizontality the events are more formal, deliberate. It features a single performance. Wood is now so much the straight man, the human body as passive object, more the impersonator. (The pattern is motion.) The constant overhead angle is elective. Seen from above, some things – flat-out things – become almost unimaginable. But other things – flat-out things – become much more apparent. The actions here often involve change from one to the other. The strange is suddenly revealed, or gradually becomes clear. There is a plate grey trolley in the centre of the image. The man stands facing it. He draws out another trolley from it, stands back, and as it topples, it crashes to the floor. So we see it is a filing cabinet, overturned by an appendage to the drawer. The man stands facing a bird plastic garden chair. He bends and picks it up, but the chair seems to stay where it is – oh, it is stuck in chairs. He leds the bird chairs on up the white chair.

The man stands against a wall in an empty room. He moves away he is holding up a large glass flat which then falls flat and fills the room. The man stands among a forest of plastic pipes, stood perfectly ready on end about the room. One by one they flip over and stick across the floor like jack-straws. The man does a lot of standing – and upright stands. He looks from above as if it were nothing. Plenty is gained in translation, in having to read out from a two-dimensional image a complete three-dimensional event. The man stands with two buckets of deep blue paint. He carefully paints them on the floor in two neat long puddles, and as he paints a white stripe appears in each puddle, which – oh yes – the reflection of the moonlight strips hanging directly above it – rather directly above it, there must be an angle of divergence for the camera that’s dead centre overhead, to catch the...

**All fall down:** a still from Wood and Harrison’s “Horizontality”

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