

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

British artists in the 1990's started to come in twos. The creative double act, traditionally at home in comedy and in the musical theatre, migrated to 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 brother and the Wilson twins. Others are couples, like

Noble and Webster and Smith and Stewart. Others still are just friends.

John Wood and Paul Harrison have been collaborating for 10 years. There isn't an obvious word for what they do together. They are performance artists, of sorts. Their work is always a video piece, never a live show. Its look is minimalist. It partly suggests the controlled experiments of conceptual art – but equally the slapstick routines of physical comedy. "Sculptural

pratfalls" is about right. The basic Wood and Harrison ingredients are two plainly dressed and deadpan men, some elementary props, a confined white room, and (no less crucial) a fixed camera position. Each piece shows a single, elegant, laconic and startling operation in three dimensional space. A man stands there stock still. A chair is thrown at him at high speed from off screen, but suddenly reaches the end of its tether, stops just short, and drops. He continues standing. Cut. A man stands on a cube. He does a little jump up. He comes down. On impact he crushes the cube beneath him flat. He stands there. Another phrase would be "geometrical farce".

In the shadow of Tate Modern, FA projects is a small art space and not very easy to find. Go east from the Tate along the river path towards Southwark Bridge. After the Globe theatre you come to a cobbled street, left, called Bear Gardens, which has no apparent street sign, but the turning happens to be marked by a heritage object – The Ferryman's Seat – fixed to the wall. At the bottom of this street FA projects is clearly signed. Upstairs, there a white-walled modern art chamber, with a bank of six big televisions.

Televisions in art galleries nowadays need a good reason to be there. In Wood and Harrison's new work – *Hundredweight* – they have one. It's a matter of boxes in boxes. Each of six televisions shows six short video pieces over and over; each of the 36 videos has the same location and the same shot: a small oblong roofless room, viewed from directly overhead. The floor is white, the walls are grey, and the corners of the walls fan out perspectively to intersect the corners of the screen. A box boxed, a perfect fit.

The new work is a departure. The comedy is muted, less knockabout. There's nothing like the wild piece shown last year, *Luton*, where the pair were sitting on office chairs rolling uncontrollably around the floor of a confined space, apparently subject to mysterious chaotic forces (the chamber was in fact the back of a van in motion). In *Hundredweight* the events are more formal, pictorial. It features a single performer (Wood). He is now not so much the straight man, the human-body-as-passive-object, more the impersonal operator, the putter in motion.

The constant overhead angle is decisive. Seen from above, some things – upright things – become almost unrecognisable. But other things – flat-out things – become much

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more apparent. The actions here often involve a change from one to the other. The strange is suddenly revealed, or gradually becomes clear. There is a plain grey oblong in the centre of the image. The man stands facing it. He draws out another oblong from it, stands back, and as it topples and crashes to the floor we see it is a filing cabinet overbalanced by an extended top drawer. The man stands facing a black plastic garden chair. He bends and picks it up, but the chair seems to stay where it is – ah, it is a stack of chairs. He lays the black chairs out on the white floor.

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The man stands against a wall in an empty room. He moves away; he was holding up a large blue flat which then falls flat and fills the room. The man stands among a forest of plastic pipes, stood precariously on end about the room. One by one they tip over and criss-cross on the floor like jack-straws. The man does a lot of standing – and an upright man, seen from above, is as weird as anything.

Plenty is gained in translation, in having to read out from a two dimensional image a complex three dimensional event. The man stands with two buckets of deep blue paint. He carefully pours them on the floor in two neat long puddles, and as he pours a white stripe appears in each puddle, which is – oh yes – the reflection of the neon lighting strip hanging directly above it – or rather, not 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 'Hundredweight'

reflections. Thus, just from a puddle of paint, a sense of the whole topology of the shoot is gained.

Or take translation the other way. Notice how spatial events become pure pictures. That's half the point of this set-up, of course. The room's four foreshortened walls are like a picture frame, and the white floor becomes a canvas in which images form or get disrupted. The space is crossed with a series of parallel black lines, like a hard-core minimalist painting. The man walks through them, and they prove to be strips of elastic, strung across, which stretch and gather before his advance.

He swings a bucket round on a string, releases it, it hits the wall, and black balls from it go flying around the floor. He roller-paints a blue strip right round the wall at head height, an oblong that exactly bisects the area of the frame.

These simple and rigorously plotted actions swing the mind between two and three dimensions. *Hundredweight* (don't get the title, though) makes you conscious of the arc of a falling plank, the angle of light rays, the volume a cupboard occupies – and equally how any room, seen from above, can metamorphose into an unfolding semi-abstract picture. Stand back a little from the televisions and you're looking at a line of kaleidoscopes, or again a cartoon strip of

men at work, the simultaneous sound-tracks keeping up a continual click, clunk, bonk, crash. Formality plays against a low-tech, hardware store aesthetic. I kind of miss the old broader comedy, but the new routines have their own delight.

And I feel I'm writing at the right moment, because they're beginning to be indescribable. Part of the joy of them now is the realisation that something that's easy to grasp by eye would be hard to put in words. There's another film piece in the show, which has no man in it; it just shows a corner of a room, with pulleys fixed in

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walls and floor; and a white rope running round these pulleys and then going off picture to (we understand) other pulleys, and coming back into picture, travelling in level lines along all three dimensions: and then somebody starts to pull on the rope, and it all moves at once through the pulleys. There are some short sections of the rope that are dyed black, and they come into and pass out of view, like a train on a track, and then there are more of them, and they come in and go round the pulleys and out again too, and then finally and rather suddenly all these black lengths enter at once, begin to converge and criss-cross, and when they stop – it's a chair. Yes?

Wood & Harrison – Hundredweight: F A Projects, 1-2 Bear Gardens, London SE1 (020-7928 3228), to 21 June (closed Sundays and Mondays)