

CRISTIN TIERNEY

## BROOKLYN RAIL

**ArtSeen**

### John Wood and Paul Harrison: *Bored*

By **Lyle Rexer**



John Wood and Paul Harrison, *Pencil/Sharpener*, 2015. Sharpener with pencil. Courtesy Cristin Tierney, New York.

In their first solo gallery exhibition in the United States, English artists John Wood and Paul Harrison arrive just in time and too late. Just in time in the sense that even as this country emerges from the pandemic—that already sounds too optimistic—we need to learn how to laugh at ourselves in a way that doesn't seem hollow or mordant or politically self-serving. Too late, on the other hand, because we may have lost the taste for small gestures. If that is the case, then we would miss the opportunities that Wood and Harrison provide to encounter worlds in grains of sand and experience the oxymoronic pleasure of deep jokes.

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John Wood and Paul Harrison, *Chair/Gum*, 2020. School chair and bubble gum, 31 1/2 x 15 3/4 x 19 11/16 inches. Courtesy Cristin Tierney, New York.

The first of those deep jokes might be the apparent sparseness of the show itself. The narrow confines of Cristin Tierney Gallery at first seemed almost empty. Of the eight pieces on view (there was another painting in the private section of the gallery), two were nearly negligible: a pedestal that supported two small pencils worn down to nibs in their manual sharpeners; the eraser of another pencil barely protruding from the white wall. We might imagine this as a

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reference to creative blockage, but I found it recalled my intense boredom in high school Latin class, where I challenged myself to make a thousand marks in groups of five by period's end. In their reference to nervous obsession and near nothingness, these objects pay forward the legacy of 1970s Conceptual art, but are ultimately more interested in emotional than linguistic issues.

Not that language is missing. A Baldessari-like wall text described the sense that life is like a film, or perhaps actually is a film we fail to recognize we are part of. This text recalled many that were included in the gallery's online video retrospective *Wood and Harrison: The First 30 Years*, posted last year. *Echt* conceptual, these texts (especially those in the 2015 video *Erdkunde*) tend toward circularity, redundancy, literalness, and incongruity. Such texts inevitably orbit Magritte's "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*." Sometimes this magic works, and sometimes it just seems arch. But lurking in the background is the sense that reality at its most boring reveals nothing except itself, and that recognition is the road to awareness.

If my boredom baseline was a school period, then the show's most prominent object made even more sense: a worn school chair that seemed to be sitting on a pile of something. Examination revealed it to be wads of gum. Hanging on the wall opposite was a blocky drawing of two clocks showing different times. That seemed about right, the excruciating notion of counting down, and the reference to González-Torres's pair of clocks showing the same time added a note of what? Solidarity? Certainly an awareness that the latter pair could be read in a variety of ways, including the poignance of time passing when so many in the LGBTQ community of the 1980s were marked for death in the AIDS crisis. There is a Shakespearean cast to all this, in Richard II's "I wasted time, and now doth time waste me: For now hath time made me his numbering clock."



John Wood and Paul Harrison, *Bored Astronauts on the Moon*, 2011. Single-channel HD video, 20 minutes. Courtesy Cristin Tierney, New York.

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The gateway to the vast body of videos by Wood and Harrison (the core of their work) was a large screen depicting a pair of astronauts (the artists) on the surface of the (studio-created) Moon doing, well, not much. As the two run out of things to do in low gravity, the story takes on the character of a weird exercise video and then a planetary *Waiting for Godot*. Watching men on the Moon repeat the same gestures for decades could help explain our current lack of collective enthusiasm for reaching the stars. The piece resembles a 2012 video, *Unrealistic Mountaineers*, in which two heavily equipped climbers (again, the artists) reach the constructed summit, only to find themselves once more with nothing to do. And because the peak is cloud capped, they are left only to imagine the transcendent view. This video probably ought to be shown to anyone about to sign up for a trip to Everest.

Through the gallery's portal to this collection of videos, a number of deeper and often unsettling preoccupations emerge, including the confining power of architecture and design and the unpredictable, even threatening nature of human encounters. Yet when we compare the work of Wood and Harrison with, say, Bruce Nauman's, the contrast is striking. Over the course of his career, Nauman, with a similar sense of the absurd, seems to have tended toward the refinement of a big idea, having to do with mobilizing the viewer's sense of their reflexivity. Harrison and Wood, in contrast, move from insight to insight, joke to joke, all the while winking at their audience to let us know that we are all adrift in the same leaky boat. But no reason to check your watch. The water will rise soon enough.

ON VIEW

Cristin Tierney Gallery

*Bored*

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