

'The Condition of England.'

Exhibition dates: 29 April – 25 June 2005

Preview: Thursday 28 April 6:00 – 8:00pm

Mustafa Hulusi

"England is, essentially, an apolitical country." John Major MP

Mustafa Hulusi's diverse body of work is linked by a constellation of overlapping interests: photography and its uses, power and its abuses, and the inextricable link between escapism and wider political and economic realities. Rather than being driven by an engagement with particular subjects or techniques, Hulusi's oeuvre revolves around the individual's relationship to the wider body politic. His working process is, as he says, "an examination of cultural identity in relation to the changing nature of socially and politically engaged art practice".

Hulusi's engagements with politicised imagery are elliptical and complex; he combines his own photographs with found imagery. Most recently, his over-riding concern has been how we encounter photographic images in the public sphere. Photography used as a form of public address is inherently about persuasion and ownership – whether physical or intellectual. Hulusi has rewired images from the public realm, creating images which are unexpectedly iconic – and both combative yet ambiguous. This strategy is exemplified by 'Possession', which recreates Victor Burgin's 1974 work. Burgin's photo-text piece appropriated advertising imagery to undercut it with the text, 'What does possession mean to you? 8% of our population own 84% of our wealth'. Hulusi's version simply fictionalizes the accompanying statistic so it becomes cruelly absurd rather than scientifically Marxian: 'What does possession mean to you, Mustafa Hulusi? 1% of our population own 99% of our wealth.' If initially seeming ridiculous, when read as a parable about the skewed economy of the art world's star system, it seems all too true. In restaging a work from 30 years earlier verbatim, Hulusi also implies the structures of the social order remain unchanged since the 'seventies, and that iniquities of wealth have become exacerbated rather than ameliorated as Kevin Carhill observes in 'Who Owns Britain?' during the last three decades. In 2004, 0.25% of the population still owned 69% of the country's land. Given the failure of a baldly didactic approach to reveal bourgeois society's contradictions, Hulusi's approach is both more aggressively oppositional and more absurdist.

Hulusi's ongoing series of monochrome screenprints on stainless steel similarly appear to illustrate Marx's remark that "in our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary". These works are ordinarily presented as diptychs, bouncing us back and forth between contrasting subjects. Seen in series, they encompass images of tanks hiding in overgrowth and idyllic landscapes; gazelle-like models (at high-class catwalk shows) and pole-dancing clubs (dignified by neoclassical décor;) naval gun-ships and 'family-friendly' public displays of combat technology. Hulusi draws our attention to both the cultural forces and the threat of force that underpin our prosperity and security in the global order. However, such works offer us a barbed and bittersweet lyricism. The image illustrated here is so romantic and iconic that we scarcely notice it is an allegory of how art itself is most often an escapist pastime, functioning as an 'opium of the people'. The individual image is part of a broader engagement with the pleasures that 'culture' or the 'superstructure' offer – in the forms of distraction, myth, reassurance and 'entertainment'. If the artist's oeuvre seems initially to offer seduction or escapism, soon enough we read it as an acid-edged lament about our ongoing inability to escape escapism. The artist's representations of edenic landscapes, for example, can initially appear charming but are anything but pastoral. Most of the locations shot by the artist are former colonial territories that have been subject to bloody struggle over their ownership; others still remain under dispute. Once aware of their histories, we are likely to feel that that they have been some of the dark places of the earth. Rather than revealing the disparity between 'reality' and 'appearance', Hulusi prompts us to consider how the different forces shaping our lives intersect, from international diplomacy and the 'military industrial complex' to the leisure industry. Such provocations require us to re-examine our own position, as citizens of a society whose wealth was amassed on military conquest and the proceeds of empire, and is sustained by conspicuous consumption.

Hulusi's prints on steel are both photographic and sculptural; they are graphically iconic yet are also perceptual puzzles. The artist's process transfigures each picture into a monochromatic two dimensional pattern, slowing down and complicating our relationship to the photographic image. The industrial surfaces are at once unyielding yet alluring. Stainless steel refuses our empathetic gaze: it is cold and mute, yet inevitably now connotes middle-class modernist domesticity. Rather than offering the pleasure of a transparent window-onto-the-world, each of Hulusi's vignettes floats intangibly over a blank ground which reflects our 'real' space. As we move around the objects, the tonal relationship between image and ground alters and the image oscillates between positive and negative. As with minimal art, Hulusi foregrounds our presence in the work: viewing becomes a test, a performative activity. On one level, we struggle to 'read in' illusionary spatial depth and are prevented from imaginatively identifying with the figures represented. At the next, we become implicitly implicated in the scenes of military power, erotic pleasure or hard labour. Viewing Hulusi's recent bodies of work, Walter Benjamin's famous phrase, "every document of civilisation is at the same time a document of barbarism", feels to be more true than ever.